



Editor's note-

This story is for all fans of *film noir* - movies like *Casablanca* and *The Maltese Falcon*. I really felt like Bogie & Bacall would appear at any moment while I was reading this story. It's a real departure from your usual *Forever Knight* fanfic. I hope you like it as much as I did!

"The Enforcer"

Intro - "The Long Forever Night"

This one's historical, too, but it's fictional-historical. Those of you who don't know Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe will recognize the style, since Chandler & Hammett invented the American detective novel between them. Their influence is everywhere.

I've collapsed the time frames. My memory of "Father's Day" is a little rusty, but I've given Nick the job I recall him having in the '30s. I've also called him Knight, even though that's probably inaccurate, because Marlowe's the type of guy who refers to people by their last names and it's just less confusing that way. The Chandler books actually take place in the 40s, but everyone always thinks it's the 30s anyway (even the people who wrote the back cover copy of my editions). So this is some nebulous time, after the release of a famous American horror film.

Marlowe's been called a tarnished knight, so I just had to have him meet *our* tarnished knight. It's going to take FK characters a little while to show up, but they'll be there. With a vengeance!

Oh -- as you cry enough already! -- I tried to avoid the title. I really did. But when you're paying tribute to the author of *The Big Sleep* and *The Long Goodbye*, you want something fitting . . .

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The Long Forever Knight

by Catherine Siemann

It was a warm, sultry afternoon in Los Angeles. At that time of year, the only surprise would be if it wasn't. I had just finished with a client -- telling the vulnerable wife of a cheating husband that I had the goods on him, unfortunately. I could tell from her expression as I handed over the photos that she'd been hoping otherwise, hoping I'd be able to tell her she was crazy, that her husband was just too embarrassed to tell her he was spending his evenings taking modern dance class or some such thing. But I couldn't. He had a mistress, all right, and that was it for that marriage. This lady had old fashioned ideas, you see. Not so typical of Los Angeles, and therefore kind of touching.

Foolish sentimental Marlowe, I couldn't even bring myself to accept the fee which she pressed on me with tear-stained eyes. "Save it. I guess you're going to need a lawyer." I waved her off. The money she'd given me at our initial meeting would cover my expenses, and as for that month's rent . . . well, I'd have to hope another client came along. One usually did, just before the landlord got threatening. But one thing was for sure -- I was never going to get rich in my line of business.

So it was something of a surprise when I found a visitor waiting patiently outside my office door. It was even more of a surprise to realize that it was Bill Madden, supervisor of security for one of the major film studios. It was a surprise to find anyone from any of the studios waiting patiently for anything, come to think of it, but especially outside of a rathole like my office.

"Hello, Marlowe. I assume you remember me, from that little matter about Ruby Fitzpatrick." Madden was just important enough that he could afford a good suit, and just unimportant enough that it didn't quite work on him. What was actually a pretty good specimen of the tailor's art hung on him like an old rag. He was medium sized and balding, altogether a forgettable-looking guy.

"Yes, I do. And what brings you from Hollywood into my part of town? Another missing ingenue? Or a leading man whose interest in his costar has come to the attention of his wife?"

"No, Marlowe. This time it's strictly big-league. This time it's murder."

"Murder? Isn't that a matter for the law, then?"

"Let me be the judge of that. Do you want the job, or not?" He looked around him, at the minimal decor of my office suite. "It looks like you could use the work."

I put my feet up on my desk in a gesture that could have conveyed either good-fellowship or contempt. What it really meant was that I wanted to gauge Madden's reaction to a less than servile attitude. The studio types could be funny about that, and my involvement in the case was going to depend on whether I could work with Madden. I offered him a drink from my desk bottle, which he accepted gratefully, and then launched into his story.

"You've heard of Jack Sanderson, right? He's a contract player with the studio, big handsome midwestern type but not quite star quality, so he plays a lot of second leads."

"The name sounds familiar. I don't get to the movies so much these days."

"What I'm saying is that Jack Sanderson was found dead, by his swimming pool, this morning."

"I'm all ears."

"Well, the thing, Marlowe, is that he was found without a drop of blood in his body. Dry as the proverbial bone. And the only wound was on his neck, a coupla puncture marks. No one's ever seen anything like it, outside of that *Dracula* flick."

"And you're telling me this because --"

"The L.A. police have agreed to let us investigate this privately, first. They're afraid it may cause something of a panic, if it gets out. I mean, clearly *Dracula* is a fairy story, but what if there's some kinda maniac, seen the movie hundreds of times or something? Besides, Sanderson was a strong guy. Whoever did this was no shrinking violet."

The L.A. police "agreed to let" the studio investigate the murder privately? Sanderson wasn't that big a star, and crazy killings happen every day in a place like Los Angeles. The studio was using that green kind of persuasion on the cops, the same they were about to offer me. So I wasn't surprised at all when Madden offered to double my usual fee. But I was quick enough to tell him that my usual fee was twice what it really was in the first place. He didn't even flinch.

"So will I be working with anyone from the police, or am I flying solo?"

"We'd prefer that you made some preliminary investigations on your own. You will report directly to me. We, not you, will make the decision when to call in the police. This has already been cleared with the Chief of Police himself."

"So do I get to see the body? The crime scene?"

"It won't be possible for you to see the body, but here's a detailed file, with photos. But unless you have another appointment, I can take you to the scene right now. And I strongly suggest that you not have another appointment. We'd like to see this thing put to rest as quickly as possible. So that you don't feel motivated to, umm, stretch out the investigation, we'll provided an additional bonus for quick completion."

We rode out to Sanderson's house in Madden's car. There was one more question that I had to ask. "You mentioned the killer made like Count Dracula. I was wondering, there are certain . . . rumors about Bela Lugosi. That he takes his part a little too seriously. That he sleeps in a coffin even when he isn't working and stuff like that. That maybe he acts out his role in other ways."

Madden smiled. "That's one of the reasons we want to keep this investigation quiet. See, we know for sure it wasn't Lugosi. But we know about those rumors, too. He does sometimes identify a little too strongly with his most famous role. In fact, it's true he sometimes sleeps in a coffin. But he's also a good family man, with a wife and kids and some real personal problems."

"Such as?"

"Such as, he's got a monkey on his back."

"Dope?"

"Intermittently. He kicks, he's clean for a while, then he can't get any work but the umpteenth stage show of *Dracula* and he begins to need a little pick me up. Lugosi's been in a rest home, kicking. He's due out at the end of the week. Any publicity about a "Dracula" killer could send him right back in and frankly, well, his wife needs him, his kids need him, and we need him to start shooting a few days after his release."

"And you're afraid if it gets into the press, the public will suspect him, or he'll begin to wonder if he's capable of such a thing when he's doped up or something like that --"

"Yeah, something like that."

"And the studio has an investment here."

Madden shot me a look of disgust such as I have never seen from a studio type before. "Well, yeah, there's that. But also . . . look, I've met the family. Little Bela Junior's only six years old, but when you ask him if he wants to be an actor like his daddy when he grows up, he says, "No! I don't wanna be an actor. I wanna be a lawyer!" I just want his old man to be able to give him that chance, to get outta this crazy life and be something real." He grimaced. "And the studio cares a lot about its investment."

Maybe Madden deserved more credit than I'd been giving him. Just because he had a few feelings didn't mean that everything was suddenly sunny and bright, but it somehow made me feel a little better about the case.

Sanderson's house was just the kind of place you'd expect a second-rate studio not-quite-star to live in. It wasn't much more than a bungalow, but it had a hacienda-style facade, and a smallish swimming pool around the back. The place where Sanderson had been found was a small concrete patio attached to the pool. There was noting at all extraordinary about it. It was the home of a second-rate dreamer who was so self-deluded that he died not even knowing that he'd never achieved his dream.

"So what about Sanderson's personal life?"

"Exactly what you'd expect. No wife, no steady girlfriend, fancied himself a ladies' man."

"Think this could be the revenge of a spurned paramour?"

"We've thought about it. But Sanderson's size is against it. If he'd have been shot, then sure, but very few women, and not so very many men, could have overpowered a guy like Jack Sanderson." He reached in his pocket and took out an envelope. "Here's his datebook. We've already dusted it for prints, and there weren't any but Sanderson's."

I filed it away to look at when I got home. Right now I just wanted to get away from everything that reminded me of Sanderson, from the pretentious small house to the pretentious small pool. I was beginning to dislike him, and I thought he deserved better than that. It was the only murder he was ever likely to get, and maybe it was his big starring role at last. Too bad there wouldn't be any sequels.

When I returned to my office, I pulled out the datebook. For a ladies' man, Sanderson hadn't been very busy lately. Earlier in the year there were many names: Judy, Marilyn, Caroline, Betty. But in the last month, only one: Janette. Fortunately, her address was in the back of the book. She lived outside of the city, in an area that was just beginning to see the encroachment of what is optimistically known as Greater Los Angeles.

It was late when I got started, and after dark when I arrived. Janette DuCharme lived in a much more attractive house than Sanderson, larger and less foolishly ornamented. It was older than its neighbors, and very well-kept, although there wasn't much in the way of a garden. There wasn't anything at all odd about the house until you saw the inside.

The woman who opened the door was strikingly beautiful, which is not unusual in L.A. But in L.A. nearly every woman is a blonde, at least professionally, and the brunettes are that fiery Dolores Del Rio type. This woman had dark hair and wore a black dress that set off the total pallor of her skin. In a town where women strive to be seen as exotic, she did it effortlessly. "May I help you?" she asked, with an accent I could not at first place.

"My name is Philip Marlowe. I'm investigating the death of Jack Sanderson. May I ask you a few questions?"

"I am Janette DuCharme. But I am still not sure how I can assist you." The accent was French, to match the name, not necessarily a given in Hollywood.

"It seems that you knew Mr. Sanderson."

"Yes, I knew him. Why don't you come in?"

Janette's house was furnished like a place from another climate, another century. Heavy velvet drapes hung at the windows, and the furniture was dark and ornate, with brocade upholstery and carved wood. There were rich oriental carpets on the floors, and the colors were red and blue, with dark, dark wood. I had never seen a place that looked less like Southern California, not even outside of Southern California.

"You don't seem surprised to hear that Mr. Sanderson is dead."

She gave an eminently Gallic shrug. "He was courting death. Should I be surprised that he found it? May I offer you a drink, Mr. Marlowe? I'm afraid that the only thing I drink is red wine. Will that be all right?"

"That'll be just fine," I lied, thinking about how nicely a whiskey would set just about now. Since there was an extra glass sitting by the wine bottle, I went to pour some for myself. "No!" I heard her cry suddenly. "That is -- this wine has been sitting for too long. Let me open a fresh bottle."

This Janette was one cool customer. Literally cool. When she handed me my drink, her hands felt like ice, and this was despite the Los Angeles summer heat, the heat that never really broke, not even at night. But the wine was excellent. It made me wonder why I was so attached to that slop in my office bottle anyway.

"Why do you say that Sanderson was courting death?"

"The company he kept. It was not wise . . . for someone like him."

"The company he kept?"

"Well, myself and a number of my friends. We were not the right people for him to know." She raised an eyebrow. "I do not mean that my friends or I killed him. We did not. But he was interested in things that should not have concerned him."

"In what sense, Miss DuCharme?"

The phone rang in the other room. "Excuse me, Mr. Marlowe."

I could hear her speaking rapidly into the telephone in French. Unfortunately, my French -- what there ever was of it -- is more than a little rusty, and I couldn't really make anything out. She returned to the room a moment later.

"In what sense, Miss DuCharme, was he interested in things that should not have concerned him?"

But that phone call was unlucky for me, because she seemed to have lost a lot of her interest in making dire comments about Sanderson. "Oh, nothing, really. Just -- going to bars on the wrong side of town, driving too fast, that sort of thing. Nothing a pampered little studio boy should be doing. And he had this idea that he was in love with me, when that was quite impossible."

"Why?"

She shrugged again. "Because I could never love him."

I wasn't going to get anything more out of her tonight, so I decided to bring the interview to a close. There was something odd about this Janette DuCharme, but whatever it was, it was clear I wasn't going to catch her unawares again tonight. So I excused myself, and was soon headed back to my apartment in the Hobart Arms, where I fell promptly asleep, to dream of pretty ladies endlessly disappearing behind red velvet curtains.

When I awoke it was bright sunlight outside. I looked at the clock on my nightstand, but unfortunately, I'd forgotten to wind it the night before. I fumbled my way to the dresser, where I found my watch. It was after noon. Not like me to sleep that late if I hadn't been rendered unconscious by force, which was one of those hazards of my profession. I often awoke in the middle of bright sunlight, but usually with a sore place somewhere on my head to indicate just where I'd been hit. I was confused for a moment because I didn't hurt anywhere.

The afternoon was frustrating and fruitless. I talked to a couple of Sanderson's studio acquaintances, but nobody had much to say about him except that he was mildly annoying, essentially well-intentioned, and that nobody had any strong feelings about him. He just wasn't the kind of guy

you'd care enough about one way or another enough to want to kill. Even his lady friends regarded him as harmless, a good-looking guy to have on your arm if there was nobody special in your life at the moment. I began to think his playing the field so much might not have been his choice. Which brought me back to Janette, the one woman he had pursued continually and exclusively for the month prior to his death.

There was certainly something odd about her. So odd that it was difficult to even begin to pinpoint what it was. But while I was sitting over a drink and pondering it, I noticed that the sun was hanging low over the horizon, already. And I still wanted to take another look at the murder site, see if anything had evaded the eagle eyes of studio security.

Nothing had, of course. Nothing ever does. When dark fell entirely, I turned away, thinking that a visit to Janette might be my only hope for a new lead. As I headed back to my car, I saw that another car was pulling up next to mine. A man got out, a blond man in a dark suit, who looked to be a few years younger than me.

"What are you doing here? You with the press?" I asked.

"No," he frowned. "Are they looking into this?"

"Depends what 'this' you're talking about."

"The Jack Sanderson murder. You *are* investigating the Sanderson murder, aren't you?"

"I might be, if there was one," I said. Let him give away his game first.

"Well, I am." He smiled, disarmingly. I wasn't disarmed.

"Just who *are* you?" I asked, not bothering to hide my impatience.

"Nick Knight. I'm with the Chicago police force." This Nick Knight was blond, but not suntanned California blond. In fact, he was unusually pale. Okay, the winters are colder in Chicago, and longer, but he looked like he hadn't seen the light of day in awhile. I guess you'd call him a handsome guy otherwise. He must have noticed my inquisitive stare. He was probably used to it. "I have a medical condition -- I need to say out of the sun . . . as much as possible. So I work nights, and even on vacation . . . well, Los Angeles is beautiful at night."

"If you're on vacation, Mr. Knight, what are you doing snooping around the scene of a murder? The L.A. cops have let the studio take charge of this, and quite frankly, *I'm* the only investigator who's been authorized."

"All right, I'll be honest with you. Sanderson's from Illinois. His parents are friends of mine. They sent me out here because they hadn't heard from him in a month. He was the kind of guy that'd write his mother twice a week and phone on Sundays, and when they stopped hearing, well . . ."

I could picture Sanderson's parents, small town Midwesterners. The mom probably wore a checked apron and the dad probably had a small business. I didn't see them hanging around with this guy. Where would he know them from? Church? He seemed like a bit of a boy scout, but even so, that was hard to swallow. "But what makes you think he'd dead?"

"I checked the records at the City Morgue. They may be keeping it from the public, but not from the Chicago police, Mr. -- ?"

"Name's Marlowe, I'm a P.I. It's an honest living, at least the way I do it. Which means I'm not getting rich at it."

"I like you already, Mr. Marlowe. Listen," he said, "since you're authorized to investigate, and since I've come all this way, why don't we join forces? You give me the official okay, and I give you --"

"What?" I asked. I didn't need this Chicago cop hampering my investigation, especially not when I'd so fortunately escaped the L.A.P.D.

"I have many talents." He smiled amiably. I was beginning to like this guy, in spite of myself, and that was worrying me. "For example," he said, beginning to head back towards the pool, "I see very well in the dark. What's this?"

What he was holding was a small black button. It looked as if it had come off of a black shirt, men's. Outside of priests, I didn't know too many people who wore black shirts, not in Los Angeles in the summertime, so this was quite a find.

"I'm impressed." I was. "But I'm calling it quits for the evening. Come by my office tomorrow afternoon, late, and we can talk."

"I'm . . . tied up tomorrow afternoon. Plus the sunlight'll be pretty strong then. Could we meet in the evening?" He looked like the kind of guy you could trust, and I have pretty solid instincts about that sort of thing, so I gave him my home address. Besides, I was in the book, so it's not like I could hide from anyone who really wanted to find me.

But before I called it a night, I wanted to pay another visit to Miss Janette. I needed answers, and I had a hunch that Janette DuCharme was the person to provide them. I stopped to get something to eat, and it was close to midnight when I pulled up in front of her place, but she didn't seem like the early bird type. I saw that there was another car in her driveway.

I took the precaution of looking in the window before I rang her doorbell. One of the heavy velvet curtains over the front windows had obviously been pulled aside and not yet readjusted.

"Janette," a man said. It was Nick Knight. "What are you doing in Los Angeles?"

"I might ask you the same question," she fired back. "I was looking for a new place to live -- since you've made it clear that I needn't think about living near you."

"Is LaCroix here, too?"

"I don't think so. I came here on my own. I haven't seen him." At least that's what I think she meant to say. What she actually said was, "I haven't sensed him."

I saw her draw closer to Knight, and he backed away a step or two. Clearly this femme was a bit too fatale for our boy scout. Perhaps now would be a good time to ring the doorbell, and save him from a potentially embarrassing situation. The lady did not seem the type that was used to being turned down.

"Nicolas, I have missed you," she said in that charming accent. My heart melted, if his didn't.

"And . . . I have missed you, too." He looked her in the eyes, and he wasn't backing away anymore, so I lowered my hand from the bell. It must have been the lighting, but I thought I saw her eyes glowing with a golden flame for just a minute before their faces met and they kissed each other hungrily. When he began to nuzzle her neck, I collected myself and turned away. Philip Marlowe may snoop for a living, but he's no voyeur. I'd have to try Janette again tomorrow. I checked my watch. Nearly 12:30 and time for this boy to get some sleep.

I wondered who Knight was really working for. Janette had seemed genuinely surprised to see him, so maybe it *was* the Sandersons. Knight and Janette clearly had some kind of history together -- they didn't kiss like it was the first time, but like it was the first time in a long time. Thinking about his pale, almost luminous skin, and remembering her equally striking pallor, I figured maybe they'd met at a convention for people with that sun-sensitivity disease or something.

On the other hand, I decided it would be best if I called the Chicago police department in the morning, just to make sure this guy was for real. After all, didn't Count Dracula hide from the rays of the sun, too? I didn't remember the movie all that well, but maybe Knight and Janette did. Maybe they were in on it together.

I wasn't given the option of sleeping in the next day. The telephone took care of that. In fact, the clock read about 7 when the phone rang. It was Bill Madden, which is what I expected. There'd been another murder, just like Sanderson's. Another minor studio player, just like Sanderson. Only Alexis Parker was a lot more popular than Sanderson. She was the kind of girl who nearly every man in the studio system had taken his chance with, and she was the kind of girl who could get away with giving in, sometimes. Every man at the studio, whether he'd been lucky with her, or not, liked her, thought she was a good sport. Women liked her too, which was unusual with a girl like that, but in this case, true. But she'd been found just inside her living room, body drained of blood and two little wounds in the neck.

The frustrating part was that she'd been killed at about 12:30 am, and that was just about the time I was turning away from Knight and Janette in a clinch. So there went my two suspicious characters.

A call to the Chicago Police Department brought me confirmation that Detective Nicholas Knight was indeed one of the Windy City's finest, and one who had attracted a lot of positive notice from his superiors. He worked nights, and he preferred to work alone, but he got results and he played it by the book. Plus, it turned out Sanderson's dad was a desk officer on the night shift there. So much for the small town apple pie picture I'd built in my head. Jack Sanderson was a city kid after all, and his dad really did work with Knight.

I met Madden at Alexis Parker's home. She lived in a flat, and a nice one. In fact, Alexis Parker lived in a flat with a doorman.

"She always said she felt safe here, what with being a single girl and all," a nearly hysterical neighbor was saying. Alexis having been so popular, this was going to be a much more difficult death to hush up. The neighbor, an older woman with red-blond hair, wearing a tired-looking housedress, looked genuinely overcome, between losing her friend and seeing the failure of her building's much-vaunted security system. "She was a wild girl, but a good girl at heart." Alexis was the kind of girl who'd dance with the studio johnnies until dawn, catch a few hours of sleep, and be ready with a plate of cookies to share with a disappointed housewife the next morning, if she wasn't shooting that day.

There were a couple of policemen at the door, who immediately stepped aside to let Madden and I enter. One of them followed us into the apartment. "The Chief is concerned. Another day or two without results, and it looks like the department will have to get involved after all."

Madden looked at me. "Marlowe's really on top of things. In fact, he's just waiting for a few last pieces of the puzzle to come together. Isn't that right, Marlowe?"

"What? Yeah, right." In fact, my attention had been transfixed by one of the many pictures displayed on Miss Parker's baby grand piano. Right next to the picture of Alexis Parker with Clark Gable, there was a picture of Alexis Parker that suddenly riveted my attention. There she was, photographed with Janette DuCharme. They were both in evening dresses, and both smiling.

The cop was trying to get my attention. Alexis Parker herself was present, covered with a sheet, and he was wondering whether I would like to take a look at the body. Well, I wouldn't, but it would hardly be professional to say so, so I nodded my approval. She was lying there, auburn curls loose around her shoulders, no makeup, looking very peaceful and very very dead. There was no expression of terror on her face. Whoever had done this must have known her, or surprised her very quickly.

"Not a drop of blood in her body," the policeman was whispering. "That's what the doc says. We've got to take her downtown now, but the Chief said we should wait for you to see her."

I thanked him, and as soon as I could get rid of Madden, I drove out to Janette's house. It was dark and still. Nobody answered, despite my repeated rings. Knight's car was gone. I guessed I'd have to go back later, and headed back to the studio, to interview all sorts of people about how absolutely beloved the late Miss Parker was. At least this time their grief seemed sincere.

I spent the day listening to Alexis Parker's praises. If Jack Sanderson had been a nobody, Alexis Parker had been a somebody. Aside from a slightly different way of living her life than the folks back home might have approved of, there was not a thing against the girl. And there was not a thing she had in common with Sanderson except the studio . . . and an unfortunate propensity to socialize with Janette DuCharme.

Slightly after dark there was a buzz from my lobby. It was Knight, coming to keep his appointment. He certainly had a lot to explain, Chicago police or not. When I opened the door, Knight and Janette were standing side-by-side.

"How very convenient," I said. "The two people in Los Angeles I most wanted to speak with. They entered, looked at each other, then back at me. "Or perhaps you hadn't heard about Alexis Parker."

"What about Alexis?" asked Janette, with just the right shade of concern in her voice. She was wearing a red number tonight, with black trimming. She was beautiful, all right, but there was something almost . . . inhuman . . . about her paleness, her stillness. "Is she all right?"

"Well, nothing's going to be hurting her ever again."

"You don't mean . . ."

"She was murdered, just the way Jack Sanderson was murdered. Two wounds on her neck and all the blood drained out of her body. You wouldn't happen to know anything about it, would you? She wouldn't have been running with the wrong crowd, say?"

Now Janette looked genuinely surprised. "No, she and Jack had nothing to do with each other, as far as I know. She came to me for elocution lessons. She was to play Marie Antoinette, and she wanted to develop a French accent for the part."

"Pardon me for being a bit cynical, but you must be giving some high-class elocution lessons to afford a house like that."

She gave a short laugh. "My money is inherited. I gave her the lessons because it amused me. One does need something to do, after all."

Now Knight, who hadn't seemed to register anything when I'd said Alexis' name, burst in. "Surely you don't suspect Janette." Living up to his name, riding to his lady's rescue.

"No," I said, lighting a cigarette. "I don't. But only by the merest of chances." I gestured to my companions. Janette graciously accepted, but Knight declined, brusquely waving the smoke away when it came near his face. "Only because I drove out to your house around midnight last night, Miss DuCharme, to ask you some further questions, and you don't close your curtains so well. Alexis Parker was killed just after midnight, and I'd have to confirm that you were each other's alibis."

They shot another glance at each other. They didn't act like a couple who'd just spent a passionate night in each other's arms, but I guess that was their business.

"Any suspects, then?" asked Knight.

"Even fewer people had any reason to wish Alexis Parker harm than Jack Sanderson. So it may be down to your black button, after all."

Janette looked at him sharply. "Black button?"

"Button off a man's shirt. Hardly a summer color, here in Los Angeles. But I'm surprised Knight hasn't told you all about it already, you two being so close and all."

I wondered what they were not saying to each other, and whether maybe I'd have a chance to find out if I left them alone for a moment. I asked them whether they'd like a drink and they both refused, so I went into the kitchenette to fix one for myself.

"Do you think we need to tell him?" Knight was asking Janette softly, so softly that if I hadn't always had extra good hearing I never would have caught it.

"We must avoid it if at all possible. The community would not --" but she broke off as I reentered the room. "Nicolas and I were just saying what a lovely community you live in. So convenient to downtown, yet so quiet."

I didn't deign to reply to that one. "Look, there've been two murders, my only reasonable suspect is you, Miss Ducharme, and you have an alibi for the second. The black button could belong to the gardener. I don't have a whole lot to go on, here. Whatever you two know, either spill it, or I may have to call in the police. I'm not sure why, but I don't think either of you would like that very much. Just call it a hunch."

Knight raised a hand to his tie, which he straightened nervously. "Okay, my attention is all yours. What else do we have to go on?"

"Well, whoever it was, either was strong enough to overpower Sanderson, or else was someone he trusted. And whoever did it, may be keeping track of who Miss DuCharme is spending her time with. The first time we met," I turned to her, "you mentioned friends. They may be suspects, or they may be next on the killer's list. But it's not an unreasonable suspicion to think that, whoever the killer is, he or she may be fixated on you."

She looked at Knight again, searching for something in his face, and when she didn't find it there, began to speak, reluctantly. "Yes, there is someone. A former lover of mine. It is possible that it was him."

"Janette, was it--?" Knight began.

"His name is Francisco DiLorenzo. He lives here in Los Angeles. He is very jealous and very violent. He did not like losing me."

"And this DiLorenzo is one of that group of friends you have spoken about?" I asked.

"Yes, Mr. Marlowe."

"Then I think it's time for me to meet your friends."

"That won't be possible," she said firmly. "They are not fond of the authorities, nor are they likely to cooperate with you. I will determine if it is Francisco, and if it is, he will be dealt with. He will disturb the peace of Los Angeles no longer. Please, Mr. Marlowe. Let me take care of this."

"I don't think you quite understand, Miss DuCharme. There have been two murders committed. Either you cooperate with me now, and this is taken care of quietly, or the police come in, and trample all over your sensitive little matters." It was then that I made my mistake, or she made hers. I put my hand gently on her arm in an attempt to soothe matters. It was quickly removed, but with such strength and such speed as to be positively incredible in a woman of her size. Strength that could have overpowered even a man like Jack Sanderson. "Who *are* you?" I asked.

"I don't think you need to know that," she said softly. "Just let me take care of the matter. Nicolas will contact you when it is over."

I looked at Knight, but his face was studiously blank. "Janette is right. This is not a matter for the police. Please, Marlowe, let us take care of it."

"But you *are* the police," I pointed out, "in case you'd forgotten. A pretty face can do that to a man."

Knight smiled. "No, I hadn't forgotten. Marlowe, I'll phone you in the morning."

I gave them a few minutes. They weren't hard to tail. Knight just didn't know Los Angeles like I do. I followed them to a shuttered house, in a decaying part of town. Mixed in between the cheap bungalows were a couple of grander houses, mostly divided into apartments, and rotting because of the weather and the lack of attention they got. This one looked deserted.

I made my way around to the side of the house, where I heard voices through a closed shutter.

"He's *here*? LaCroix is *here*?" Knight sounded angry.

"But Nicolas, you know he always turns up when we are in trouble. I did not contact him, I swear it. He just *knows*." Janette sounded less distressed than resigned.

I couldn't hear footsteps, but suddenly there was a third voice in the room. "Will you never learn, Nicholas? I am always there for my children when they need me." It was a man, an Englishman by the sounds of it. "And you *do* need me, Nicholas, make no mistake about it."

"Why is this suddenly my problem? It's Janette's little friend who's been breaking the Code. He's the one who's put the community at risk with his foolish behavior in not concealing his kills."

"Yes, and you had to come blundering in, helping one of your mortal friends locate a missing son. Janette could have handled this private investigator by herself, but not once you were involved, *Detective Knight*. Honestly, Nicholas, after all these centuries, have you learned nothing?"

At was just at this moment that my body chose to betray me. I was seized with a sudden uncontrollable urge to sneeze. It was soft, they shouldn't have heard it, but whoever these people were, the ordinary rules didn't seem to apply to them.

"What was that?" asked the Englishman.

Knight sounded reluctant as he answered. "I think I know. Wait just a moment." A minute later I found him at my side. "Marlowe, this was a really *bad* idea. I'm trying to protect you, and you're not making it easy."

"Protect me from what?" But I knew he wouldn't answer.

I followed Knight into the house, and into a back room. Janette was there, and with her was one of the strangest-looking men I have ever seen. He was so pale that Knight and Janette looked almost tanned in comparison. His hair was extremely short, like a marine's, and his pale blue eyes were deeply shadowed. If you'd have told me that he was some kind of supernatural killer, I'd have believed you.

Knight introduced me, in what seemed to be a weak attempt to maintain decorum. "Lucien LaCroix, may I present Philip Marlowe? Marlowe is the detective who's been working with me on the Sanderson murder."

"Charmed, I'm sure," drawled LaCroix. French name, British accent, and he gave off the air of having lived in a lot of different places. "Nicholas, are you quite insane?" He rolled those eyes. "Nothing . . . personal, Mr. Marlowe." He turned back to Knight. "But a mortal cannot know our secrets." And then he turned to me once again, and something happened that I still have trouble believing, something that returns to me on sleepless nights. His eyes changed color, from blue to an amber-gold and his teeth . . . I have trouble believing it and I was there. His teeth had transformed into fangs, like a wildcat's or a tiger's. "Our secrets must remain safe." He lunged towards me, grasping at my shirt collar.

But suddenly Knight was between us, and as I glimpsed his face, he had transformed himself in the same way. "No, LaCroix!" he snarled. "Marlowe is my responsibility. I will take care of him."

"The only way to take care of him is to kill him -- or to bring him across. Which are you going to choose?"

"Neither," said Knight. "Marlowe can be of use to us. And he is honorable."

LaCroix's face had returned to normal. "You and your mortal virtues. What is honor, Nicholas? Very well, Mr. Marlowe, you may stay -- for the moment."

I turned to Janette, knowing what that lovely mouth must also contain. "And you? Do you have any sudden surprises for me?"

She nodded. "I am what they are."

"Vampires. Like in the movies. Unlike the infamous Mr. Lugosi, whom it might interest you to know I am trying to protect."

LaCroix curled his lip. "Bela Lugosi movies? Come now, you can hardly believe we are accurately represented by those . . . primitive jokes."

"And this is supposed to get me to *remove* you all from my suspect list?" If those movies told the truth, I was pretty much defenseless right now. Silver bullets, wasn't it? And wooden stakes and garlic. None of those in my pockets. No crosses, either. "We thought the killer might possibly be someone who thought he was a vampire. You three don't just *think* you're vampires, do you? Unless there was some sleight-of-hand with the eyes and the teeth?"

Knight smiled. No fangs now. "No, no magic tricks."

"Well, then, let's get to work. But if you'll pardon me, I'm going to have a drink, first." There was a nearly-full hip flask in my pocket. I drained about half of it in one swig, to no apparent effect except that my heart found its way back into my chest.

"I'd like a drink, too," said Janette, meaningfully. I wasn't sure I liked her anymore. But LaCroix handed her a bottle of what looked like red wine and probably wasn't. I tried not to think about it as they passed the bottle between them, or about the bottle of wine she'd prevented me from pouring from in her apartment that night. Tried not to, but failed. Knight declined, but he probably just wasn't hungry. I didn't want to think about that, either.

Well, Marlowe, if anyone had ever told you you'd be drinking with a trio of vampires, would you have believed them? I took another quick tip from my flask and screwed the cap back on.

"So this Francisco you were mentioning before?"

"Is one of us," confirmed Janette. "As I have said, he was my lover for a time. But I was ready to move on and he was not. Why he chose to wreak his vengeance on my mortal associates, I do not know. He may have thought I was prepared to bring one of them across to join me, to replace him in my affections."

"Bring them across -- make them into vampires?"

She nodded. I thought of LaCroix's words earlier and shuddered again.

"Alexis Parker, as well as Jack Sanderson?"

Janette looked me straight in the eye. "If one of them could have tempted me, it would have been Alexis Parker. She was far more . . . interesting. And far more attractive."

I liked her again. She was honest, all right. "But, in fact, neither of them did."

"No. They did not."

"And is there anyone else who might have given him reason to be jealous? Anyone else, uh, human, you were spending a lot of time with?"

She thought for a moment. "Yes. Yes, there was one other mortal with whom I spent a fair amount of time. His name is Paul Kaminsky and he lives out by the water, at Venice Beach. He is painting my portrait."

I nodded to Knight. "Let's go."

"Excuse me," said LaCroix, raising his hand and pointing to me. "You are proposing to accompany a vampire, to protect a mortal from another vampire? Do you have the vaguest idea what that involves?"

"Look," I said, "all I know is that Paul Kaminsky is in danger. You two do what you want. But the three of you are going to be pretty conspicuous together. *You* were talking about the need for secrecy. Knight's the least noticeable. I mean he -- passes for human the best."

"I take that as a compliment," Knight smiled.

"You would," LaCroix raised an eyebrow. "We'll meet you there." He turned to me. "We won't let Kaminsky see all three of us together."

Knight and I got into my car. I knew Los Angeles a lot better than he did. "Are they following us in your car?"

He hesitated. "They'll meet us there."

"Okay," I said. "I guess Janette knows her way." But there was something else on my mind. "LaCroix was willing to kill me to keep your secret. Why does he want to help save Kaminsky?"

Knight smiled, resignedly. "I don't think Kaminsky's well-being is very high on his list. Taking care of DiLorenzo, before he annoys Janette any further, or puts her in any danger, is what LaCroix is concerned about. If he has any concern at all about Kaminsky, it's because he knows how much it would annoy Janette if her portrait weren't finished."

We rode in silence much of the way to Venice Beach, an artists' colony on the water. I had a lot to absorb, and Knight seemed concerned about something.

Finally, he spoke. "If DiLorenzo does show up, you could be in a great deal of danger."

"Should I stop off and pick up a bottle of holy water?" I asked, sarcastically.

I was surprised when he said, quite seriously, "Can you get one?"

I'm not Catholic, and I hadn't been inside a church of any sort in years, but it happened that there was a priest I knew who lived out in our general direction. He was a good sort, did a lot for the kind of lost souls I came across all too often in my work, and we'd helped each other out before. We took a brief detour -- we didn't even know whether tonight was the night DiLorenzo would pick to strike -- and I stopped by the Rectory. Knight waited in the car -- he explained that religious symbols did, in fact, have some kind of power over him. A few moments later, I'd emerged with a sizable crucifix under my arm (usually resident on Father Matthew's living room wall) and a bottle of holy water in my jacket pocket.

Knight flinched, and hard, when he saw the crucifix, which I concealed under a blanket in the back seat of my car. He smiled ruefully. "We took these things more seriously in my day."

"In your day?" I asked him.

"What would you say if I told you I was a Crusader in medieval Europe, before I became . . . what I am?"

He looked about thirty-five, a couple of years younger than me. "Now, my history's a little rusty," I said, "but that would make you what -- seven, eight hundred years old?"

"About that." He was serious.

"This is getting too weird for me," I admitted. "And Janette, LaCroix?"

"Are older than I am. LaCroix, particularly, he was a Roman general." He smiled ruefully. "The only reason I'm telling you all this is because it will be arranged so that you forget it, at the end."

"To protect your community, as you called it?"

"That, and, because otherwise, we would have to kill you. But I won't let that happen."

"Nick Knight, you are the strangest policeman I have ever met."

"Just trying to atone for some of the damage I've caused over the centuries." He looked serious when he said that.

I thought about the crucifix in the back seat, and suddenly, I was glad it was there. But soon we were in Venice.

Kaminsky's house was a small beach shack, near the water. There were a number of really large windows opening into what was obviously his studio, facing the water. The rest of the house was behind the studio, and it was pretty clearly bachelor's quarters. It wasn't large enough for more than one person. We walked around to the back of the house. The window was open, to catch the breezes, and we could hear a sound of steady breathing. Kaminsky was home, and he was peacefully asleep. For now.

"Perhaps DiLorenzo's not coming, tonight," whispered Knight. I had a strange sensation of motion, and suddenly Janette and LaCroix were beside us. Knight motioned them further away from the window, where the three of them stood in whispered conference. It occurred to me that I hadn't heard them drive up. Perhaps they'd gotten here earlier and parked further away. LaCroix looked up and our eyes met. They were the coldest eyes I'd ever seen. I was hiding the crucifix under my jacket now, and I gave it a little squeeze, much like in another tight space I'd feel for my gun.

We waited for perhaps an hour, listening to the surf washing against the shore. The ocean breezes chilled me, the first time I'd been chilly in months. Then suddenly, with that same odd whoosh of motion, there was another in our midst.

It was DiLorenzo. His bared fangs and reddened eyes told me that. He saw LaCroix, first, and sprang at him. There was a struggle that I couldn't quite make out in the dark, just two dark-clad bodies and the flash of teeth and eyes, and a sound of snarling, like animals. I pulled out my flashlight, hoping to see better, and perhaps to shine it in DiLorenzo's eyes and temporarily blind him.

LaCroix was lying on the ground, bleeding from his throat. I wondered if what he was bleeding was what I had seen him drinking earlier. Despite his obvious strength, DiLorenzo's madness and recklessness had given him the edge. Janette rushed to LaCroix's side, while DiLorenzo turned to face Nick Knight. "You," he spat. "You're the reason she doesn't love me. The *real* reason." And he rushed at Knight. In the flashlight beam, I could see that all his clothes, even his shirt, were black.

For a moment they grappled together, more like a pair of wildcats fighting than two men. And then Knight was sent sprawling, bleeding from several places. DiLorenzo looked at Janette and at me, quickly discounted me as no threat, and advanced on his beloved.

"I'll make you love me," he growled. "I'll *make* you." She hissed in response.

Her fangs were just as frightening as the men's, her eyes just as red, but she was much less DiLorenzo's size. I saw that Knight was up again, and that he was heading towards the studio. Then it struck me: Kaminsky would stretch his canvas on pieces of wood . . . which could be sharpened into stakes. I had a quick flashback to *Dracula*, where the Count is staked through the heart by the hero. Knight was going to do the same, if Janette and I could keep DiLorenzo busy while he readied the stake. I rushed forward with my crucifix, hoping it would have the same effect on DiLorenzo that it had had on Knight.

He saw it and shrank back, as did Janette. But while she flinched and stood her ground, he actually moved as if to flee. He could not, though. LaCroix was up again and holding him from behind. He was using DiLorenzo's body as a shield, so that he himself could not see the crucifix. I advanced on DiLorenzo, and pulled the holy water bottle out of my pocket. I couldn't warn LaCroix without warning DiLorenzo, so I hoped for the best as I uncorked the bottle and threw it in his face.

I've never seen a vitriol-throwing, but I've read about them. DiLorenzo's face began to smoke, to burn, as he writhed in agony. And then Knight was there, armed with a wooden stake which he thrust through DiLorenzo's heart. He twitched for a moment, and was still. As he died, he screamed in heart-wrenching agony.

Lights switched on inside the house. "Is anybody there? What's the matter?" It was Kaminsky, in his pajamas, awakened by the sound.

"Everything's under control. It's the police," I lied. I went to meet him, flashing my P.I. badge briefly in the dark. I gave him a quick excuse about disturbances in the neighborhood but how there was nothing to worry about now. He gladly bought it. He wouldn't want to have to sleep with his windows closed and locked in this weather, not and miss that ocean breeze.

When I returned to the yard, they were gone, even the body. There wasn't a scrap of evidence that they had ever been there, except the crucifix I'd just dropped and the holy water vial. My flashlight showed what seemed to be some grey ashes on the lawn.

My car was parked where I'd left it, so I drove home. There really wasn't anything else to do, until the morning when I'd phone Bill Madden. I drove back into town, back to my place, had a couple bourbons, and collapsed into bed, prepared for a restless night, and strange dreams.

But, in fact, I slept soundly and dreamlessly until a couple of hours before dawn, when I awoke to find LaCroix and Janette standing at the foot of my bed. I sat up quickly, too stunned to speak, and remembered I'd left the crucifix in my car.

"And what shall we do about Marlowe?" asked Janette.

LaCroix stepped forward and fixed those pale blue eyes directly on mine. "You will forget everything you have seen. You never met me. There are no such things as vampires. Janette is just a suspect, who proved innocent. Nicholas is just a policeman from Chicago. The murderer was insane and he was accidentally killed while you and Nicholas were apprehending him. The body washed out to sea."

I nodded, entranced by his gaze and words.

"I was afraid you were going to kill him," said Janette. "He is only a mortal, but . . ."

"There is something about him. You noticed it, too. . . . I have not respected a mortal in many centuries. I respect Marlowe. That is why I will not kill him. I would bring him across, only I suspect he would present us with the same sorts of problems that Nicholas does."

Knight rushed into the room. "LaCroix, don't!"

"You are too late, Nicholas. I have already erased his memory." Knight looked relieved. "He is still in an entranced state. You must tell him a story . . . one that he can tell to his clients and to the police."

I remember no more, except waking up in my own bed, in bright sunlight, with a throbbing head and two different versions of what had happened running simultaneously through my mind. I phoned my client and told him the one I knew he would believe. The one that didn't really happen.

You see, LaCroix hypnotized me so that I wouldn't remember about him, or vampires, or any of those secrets we mere mortals are not supposed to know. But there are some people who can't be hypnotized. And I'm one of them.

Knight came to see me that evening, just after sunset, and went away happy. For all he could tell, I thought he was just a nice-guy policeman from Chicago, nothing more or less. I knew LaCroix didn't want to kill me, so I wasn't going to go out of my way to make him.

Well, I guess they went back to Chicago, because I never saw any of them again. Knight and Janette, well, whatever there was between them, I hope they worked it out, because they were quite a pair and I would have felt sorry for anybody else who fell for either of them. And not just because they were vampires. As for LaCroix, I think there would have been a lot of work for him in Hollywood, if he'd have stayed. He'd have had a real future playing decadent crime bosses and mad scientists. His most benign looks were more menacing than the best frightening that Edward G. Robinson and Boris Karloff could manage between them. But I guess shooting during the days would have been a problem.

The studio, and the police, were happy to accept my explanation. The studio paid me enough that I wouldn't have had to work for a year. But somehow I couldn't do that, so I paid my landlord the next six months in advance and stuck the rest in a bank account to tide me over whenever my sentiment defeated my business sense.

But first I went down to Mexico, to sit in the sun for a few days. I've never hidden the fact that I like to drink. But I never get really drunk, never cross that line into oblivion. Only I got real drunk, that kind of drunk, for a couple of days down there in Mexico, drinking tequila in the sunshine. Real real drunk. And by the time the cumulative hangover began to fade, I had begun to convince myself it was probably just a dream, anyway.

They call death the big sleep. And it's not such a bad thing, really. Just not if it comes too soon, or at the hands of someone you trusted, or loved. What Knight and Janette and LaCroix were facing was a lot worse. Like being an insomniac, only forever. And there's never any sunlight, never a reprieve from the darkness. Just one long *forever night*.

FIN

The following story was written in response to a Cliffhanger Story Challenge that ran on FKFC. Basically, it was a "Perils of Pauline" kind of thing - you know, the type of story that leaves off with the hero in a death trap that you have to wait until the next installment to see if he escapes or not. The following tale was my personal favorite piece written in the Cliffhanger Challenge. Hope you enjoy ! :-[

White Knight, Black Pawn

by Catherine Boone

Sidney meowed patiently on the floor at the foot of the bed for several minutes, then leaped on the bed, causing it to bounce up and down slightly. Natalie only shifted a little, drawing the covers around her and nearly knocking Sidney off the bed. All other wake-up calls ignored, a very hungry kitty used the fail-safe, guaranteed-to-get-food-RIGHT-NOW method: he climbed up and sat on her face.

"...Mmm?...Mmhhmm!! Agck! Ptui! Okay, okay, I'm up." Nat sat up, partly just to get Sidney off, and partly because he usually doesn't resort to drastic measures unless she **really** overslept. Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, she grabbed the clock by her bed and peered at it. 7:39. Yup, twenty minutes to be at the station, coherent and dressed. That would do it. She leaped out of bed, taking the fastest shower known to man, and sped all the way to the station, hoping to God that the cops were all on shift change too, and not stopping poor half-asleep coroners.

Through some minor miracle, she managed to make it to work only about fifteen minutes late. As she stumbled through the door, Grace took one look at her, and disappeared for a few moments, returning with a still-steaming cup of coffee in one hand, a stack of files in the other.

"So whadda we got tonight?" Natalie took the coffee first, and let Grace talk while she took a long swig, then squeaked and ran to the faucet for some cold water.

"Male, 6'1", 180 pounds, name of Charles Madison, found in a dumpster off Spadina Avenue." Grace chuckled as Nat nursed her scorched tongue. "You're gonna love this one. He apparently came in around ten this morning, and Scott couldn't make heads or tails of it. He almost stayed overtime on your shift, just to see if you could figure it out."

Oh damn. Not today. "What was it he couldn't make heads or tails of?" Grace moved to the body on the table, while Nat set her water down and followed, prepared to look properly confused and bewildered at whatever she might see.

Grace flipped the sheet back, just enough to reveal the head and neck. Not terribly remarkable in any respect, if you didn't count the fact that half his face was caved in. As Natalie bent to inspect the wounds closer, Grace gave her the details. She knew them even as they were spoken. "Preliminary report shows victim sustained a blow to the face consistent with the handstrike of a person 5'4"-5'9" tall." No wonder Scott was gibbering. She would have, too, at the sight of someone, not a small guy, who got half his face crushed from one punch. Especially since it was at the hand of someone who, for all they could tell, was at least four inches shorter than he, likely up to half a foot. Not possible. As far as he knew, anyway.

But Grace wasn't finished. Also expected. "Cause of death: severe blood loss. But they don't have any idea where it is." Grace continued, snapping the file shut and handing it over. "The blood is just gone, and we can't find any wounds on the body that would result in so much blood loss. Even the face didn't bleed overly much. Weird, huh?"

Natalie made her way back to her desk, the file spread out before her. No question what this was. The only problem being to find a convincing lie for Scott, since it'd already attracted his attention. As Grace went on to other things, her hand fell instinctively to the phone. But one question kept repeating through her mind... she put the phone back down and shuffled through the report till her eye caught the time of death. 7:30 am, a good half-hour after dawn. **What the...** Her hand fell to the phone again, and this time she **did** call. "Hi, Nick? It's Nat. Is Schanke there with you?"

"Hmm? No, he's out grabbing a bite to eat. What's up?"

"I want you to come over and take a look at our latest customer."

"Why? What is it?" The concern in Nick's voice was well concealed for the appearance of a normality, but she still heard it. She always did.

She stared at the report some more, the time of death most of all. She shook her head slightly and frowned. "To be honest, I'm not sure."

Fifteen minutes later, Nick was sitting on Natalie's desk, wearing an identical frown. Nat stood before him while he read through the report. "So you see why I would be confused. It seems obvious that he was killed by a vampire, but he didn't die until well after sunrise! It doesn't make sense!"

Nick put down the folder and looked up at her with an impenetrable expression. "Half an hour after sunrise would mean that the sun probably hasn't topped most of the buildings... a good portion of the city is still in shade."

Natalie shook her head, unconvinced. "But why wait so long? Why take so great a risk?"

Nick simply stared at the floor...

(flashback: Athens, 1350)

It was an unusually warm summer, the innkeeper had chatted while he took them to their rooms. He didn't blame them for staying indoors and out of the treacherous heat. Lacroix had smiled at that. "The sun can be terrible, can it not?"

Janette and Nicholas complained about the heat, but Lacroix assured them it would be worth it in the end. As Nicholas wandered the streets aimlessly that evening, he smiled inwardly. Of course, Lacroix had been absolutely right. After a long day of sitting in humid, stuffy rooms, with no fresh air to speak of, the townspeople and neighboring villagers were out by the dozen after the sun had set, to do the shopping and chores that were simply too strenuous for daytime.

And as he turned yet another corner, he saw her. She was beautiful, of course, but there were many others more striking than she. No, it was the straightness of her spine, the purpose of her gaze, the confidence of her walk... Nicholas slowed, and turned to follow her. She happened to glance his way, and met his eyes for a moment. They held not a trace of fear. He grinned in anticipation. It would be a good hunt.

He played with her, catching her eye as he passed her, walking in the opposite direction, then doubling back and passing her again in the same way. She would see him behind her in the reflection off a pane of glass at a vendor's stand, motionless in the milling crowd, watching her. Yet when she turned, he was not there. For hours, the game progressed.

To its inevitable conclusion. After two hours of not catching sight of him anywhere, she decided she had lost her pursuer, and to make sure he didn't catch her, she took the beach route home, on the edge of the city. Keeping her eyes to the ground, she prayed not to be recognized for the few minutes more that it took to get home in safety. A sudden rush of wind blew up; so strange, it had been breathless for over a week. She raised her eyes for a moment, and there he was before her. She could do no more than gasp before his eyes were locked with hers, and her thoughts were overlapped with another's...

Now fully in his thrall, Nicholas caressed her motionless cheek. The undisguised terror in her eyes almost made him laugh. Or cry. "Not quite so fearless..." His fingers came under her chin as he raised her face to look at him, and to get a better view of her neck. "Are you?" A seductive smile, wasted, as he ever so slowly leaned toward her, and took what she had to give.

He had no idea how long they stood in that spot, locked together. It seemed but a moment. And maybe it was. But from one moment to the next, the sun rose.

He screamed hoarsely, half in pure surprise, half in agony, as his skin blistered and scarred. He turned to search vainly for protection, the tiniest scrap of shadow from the sun, when one appeared before him. Grabbing him roughly by the waist, a heavily smoking and cursing Lacroix took to the air at lightning speed. Janette had simply left the window to their rooms open, and they barreled through.

After pulling them both to one side, out of the sun's path, Lacroix took a step back and gave Nicholas a backhand full on the face, throwing him to the floor. "Idiot!" He kneeled and examined Nicholas' wounds. "You'll live. But you don't deserve to. Perhaps this will teach you to be more attentive next time." He moved to close the blinds as Janette appeared at Nicholas' side with a basin of cool water and bandages, and began to dab at his face.

Keeping his eyes on the floor, Nick replied to Natalie, "Sometimes vampires get too involved in the hunt, especially young ones. They can lose track of the time, and get stuck." He felt more than saw her questioning gaze. "It's been known to happen."

He wouldn't meet her eyes.

Nick got dressed for work the next night with resignation. He and Schanke had tried everything they could think of in the Madison case, but so far there were no leads. No one had been around at the time of the murder, none of the shops nearby were open yet, and the only thing conspicuous about the crime scene was the utter lack of clues. He was about to walk out the door when the phone rang.

It was Schanke. "Get a move on, buddy boy, Natalie's been sitting on your desk for the past fifteen minutes. We got another one."

- On his way to the station, Nick switched on the radio.

"The mind is such a curious thing. We think we control it, own it. We believe it to be our stronghold, our fortress against the outside world. Inside our own mind, we believe ourselves to be safe. And yet, the scientific world has tried repeatedly to delve into the subject, and has repeatedly failed. Its nature eludes us, even as we find solace there. The conscious mind is familiar, of course, we *are* our conscious minds, after all. But the subconscious? No one knows. It is the greater part of our mind, and stronger by far; given a post-hypnotic suggestion, the one is helpless to the whims of the other. Is it really you that is in control, in that case, do you think? And if not, who is it that's living in your mind? Or is it some soulless thing, that only does as it's told?"

He paused, and the night closed in. His soft laughter whispered in the darkness. "Oh, every once in a while, we can influence our subconscious; there are always stories of women lifting automobiles to rescue their infants, and similar feats of strength or speed. But it is never through conscious thought. No one can fully control their own mind. And so far, no one has had the knowledge... or the means... to tap this wellspring of power in anyone else, either."

"Yet."

"So look inside yourselves, my children. Dare to probe the dark recesses of your soul. For there, you will find... the Nightcrawler."

Nick switched the radio off.

Natalie scanned the report as they walked through the doors into the morgue. "This is definitely the same killer. This time the victim suffered cracked ribs, and the bruising indicates he was held from behind. Same blood loss..." and she glanced at Nick meaningfully, "...same time period. But, there is a light at the end of this tunnel."

Schanke was already dragging his feet. "Yeah, it's called a freight train. Man, we are *never* gonna finish this case with no clues."

Natalie stopped in front of her desk. "Then look no more, Schank, cause I..." she paused to make sure they were at the edge of their seats, "got a skin sample." She grinned and waved a slide under their noses. "Found it under his fingernails right before I went to see you guys. I should have the results from the DNA test back in a couple days."

"Awright! I'm gonna be home in time for dinner for once! I gotta call Myra..." Schanke was already halfway to the door. He turned and blew her a kiss. "Natalie, you're beautiful! Don't ever change! I'll see you two tomorrow!" And then he was gone, practically running down the hall.

But as soon as Schanke was gone, Nat's smile faded. Anxious to get her new information off her chest, she immediately turned and whispered, "Nick, I ran a couple tests on this, and..."

"And it's not a vampire." He nodded.

"*And* I took a closer look at those holes in his neck, and they were definitely made by an instrument, not teeth. But how..."

Despite himself, he grinned. "Lacroix's little soliloquy of the day was about the power of the subconscious."

"Ah." She frowned thoughtfully. "Do you think he might know something we don't?"

Nick got a wicked grin. "Of course." His voice got husky and low, making a fair imitation of Lacroix. He scrunched up, like a cat about to pounce. Nat lifted an eyebrow. "He *is*..." Nick sprang at Nat, catching her around the waist and spinning her around. Whispering seductively in her ear, "the *Nightcrawler*. He *always* knows." Nat giggled, and he smiled. His arms remaining loosely about her waist, he reasoned, "Well, one thing is for sure, he either does know something, or he wants me to think he does. I just need to find out which. Which means..."

"You need to go to the Raven."

"...I need to go to the Raven."

The familiar throb of the Raven rose and crested over him as he made his way to the bar. Pausing to listen for a moment, Nick smiled in appreciation. Trust Janette to find a song that beat in time to the hearts around her. Always the elegant touch.

He spotted her, leaning casually on the other end of the bar, watching the tide of vitality ebb and flow with the music. She turned to pick up her drink, and found Nick at her side, smiling down at her. "I like your taste in music."

"Mmm, this song *is* the most popular... with both crowds." She smiled in satisfaction. "When I first heard it on the radio, I knew it would soon become a favorite. Some beats never die, non?" She glanced at his face, so wary and distracted as he watched the swirling crowd... her face remained studiously impassive, revealing not a single twinge of regret, at the passing of the moment. "But you are not here to critique my music." Setting her drink down, she turned to face him with complete attention. "What can I do for you?"

Relieved that Janette had broken the ice, and guilty that there was ice to break, Nick related the facts of the case to her. "But Nicola, if you're so certain it is a mortal doing this killing, why come to me? I know no mortals."

He smiled. "I know. But no mortal could have committed these crimes alone. We believe he may be a victim of a post-hypnotic suggestion, and from the loss of blood, we're guessing some kind of vampire involvement. I just wanted to know if you've noticed any unusual mortals around here, any new vampires in town, anything."

Scorn dripping from her voice, she replied, "Nicola, why would any vampire resort to using a mortal to get their food? We have all we need here." She raised her glass, then glanced doubtfully at it. "It's not fine cuisine, to be sure, but your puppetmaster doesn't seem to be getting it straight from the neck, either." She took a sip from the glass before setting it back down. "Perhaps he or she has a higher motive? Perhaps it is not 'who' you should ask, but 'why'? Why would a vampire use a mortal to make killings he knew would be found out, since he chose an area known to be guarded by one of his own kind?"

It took him only a moment. "Lacroix. Of course. I should have seen it from the moment I switched on the radio." A triumphant grin lit his face, and he bent to kiss her. "Thank you, Janette. I don't know what I would do without you."

Her smile at his back was brittle, but it was all right. He hadn't looked back to see it. He never did. Janette turned again to watch the dancers, alone in a crowd, the colored lights reflecting in her eyes.

Once outside the Raven, Nick ducked into a darkened alley, double-checked to make sure no one happened to be passing by, and took to the air. He started off slowly in the direction of CERK, to save his strength, but as he methodically went through all Lacroix had done in his mind, he began to fly faster, and faster. This situation was intolerable. He would have answers.

Lacroix paused for a moment, as if listening for something. He stood, picked a reel from the shelves, and threaded it through the speaker, letting it play out the rest of his time slot. He sat back to wait, and a few minutes later Nick burst in, full of righteous fury, as always.

"Lacroix, what is the meaning of these killings? I would have thought using a mortal to be beneath even you."

Lacroix smiled indulgently. "Well, normally I would agree, but in this case, I found I simply could not resist the challenge."

Knowing that gleam in his eye, Nick forced himself to relax and smile. He whispered conspiratorially, stepping closer as he spoke, "Who is he, Lacroix? Where is he going to strike next?"

Lacroix's eyebrow shot up, and he laughed. "What makes you think I'm going to tell you anything?"

Nick's smile never wavered. "Because you need to have something to gloat about afterward. Now tell me."

Lacroix leaned back in his chair, and stared at the ceiling for a moment, then just when Nick thought he wasn't going to tell him, he spoke. "Your precious killer will strike in..." he glanced at the clock, "about an hour, five blocks east of here." Nick turned to leave, glad to have the chance to catch this madman, no matter what the cost. Lacroix smiled to his back. "Don't be late."

How Natalie managed to even *find* her keys in the abyss of her purse, she never could quite figure. It took all her mental effort just to make it all the way to the couch before collapsing on it, for just the tiniest minute, of course, before she had to go make dinner. Her right shoulder had started to ache halfway through the night, and now just wouldn't quit. She sighed. *Pain should respect working hours, just like I do. It should click in the morning, click out in the evening, and doesn't get the option of overtime.* She opened her eyes to see Sydney on the floor next to the couch, waiting to be petted.

"Sid, I really need a day job, y'know that? This whole night thing is just getting me down." Sydney meowed sympathetically, then jumped on her arm, which had been massaging her other shoulder. Natalie felt a sharp twinge of pain. "Yeowch! Hey, cat, watch where you step!" But her arm still throbbed, right where Sydney's back paws had hit. Not remembering running into any doors offhand, she sat up to check it out.

When she rolled back her sleeve, to find a neat bandage she most certainly did *not* remember putting there. She lifted the bandage to find four long scratches, all in a row. They were far too wide for Sydney, in fact, they looked awfully like hand scratches. She lifted her other hand and tried to trace them, but they were just a little too wide for her, and not really at the right angle for her own hand. Her forehead creased as she stared at the four red marks. *What the bloody...?*

Then, with a crash of utter certainty, she knew. She laid her hand over the scratches. They were too spread out to have been from her hands, but not for a man 6'1", 190 pounds... the second victim. The DNA sample.

Oh my God.

"Natalie..." She jerked around, to see Lacroix at her window. Her eyes grew wide, and, without knowing why, she clapped her hands over her head, and screamed at the top of her lungs, not out of fear, but to keep herself from hearing what came next. Lacroix waited until she took another breath, then whispered gently, "...hunt."

In March I posted a story based on Sting's song, "Why Should I Cry For You?" which included a completely gratuitous Enforcer character named Rene. This story is why Rene found a place in that story. This story was begun in June of 1996, and I wrestled with it as much as I wrestled with "Why Should I Cry For You?" I cannot claim that my final choices in ending the story are the best I could have made, but I offer it to you, regardless.

The title is deliberately ambiguous.

Fair warning: If you read "Why Should I Cry For You?" you should know that Last Knight happened for me, and I can neither ignore it nor rationalize it. With thanks and much love to my beta readers (who pestered... for a year), particularly 'Ganger, who pestered the best, and the HorseChicks.

Resolution

by Elizabeth Ann Lewis

It was cold in the station. Goosebumps rose on my arms and I absently rubbed them for warmth as I shuffled through folder after folder, pale yellow/beige blurring into a colorless mass. My blazer hung on the back of the chair, but I didn't move to put it on. The sleeves dragged through the papers and were more trouble than they were worth in warmth. My trained mind fixed on random details passing before my eyes, disregarding my physical discomfort. Whether or not this exercise was of any use didn't matter at the moment; the ritual calmed me and gave my brain a chance to stop chasing its tail and heel at my command.

The call had come three days before, catching me at a rare moment between assignments. I was in the apartment--I can't call it my home, since it only sees my presence for three out of every twelve months. They said that she was missing, simply gone without a trace. For a moment I wondered why they had bothered to call me. It was an unsettling realization that my name was listed as her "next of kin"--because there was no other kin left.

They intended the report to be a mere formality, comforting police to grieving sister. They failed to take into account the fact that I was an investigator, and unlikely to leave the case alone. I'll give them this, they eventually accepted the inevitable with good grace. Capt. Reese gave me access to all the files I asked for, and a desk to work at. There were two to choose from--a dead woman's and a missing man's. I choose the man's, in the superstitious hope that somehow Nick Knight's thought process would merge with mine, and I would begin to understand why he and my sister had disappeared on the same night.

The facts were sparse. Dr. Natalie Lambert had given notice, packed up the things in her office, and isappeared. Det. Nicholas Knight lost a second partner within a year, was on the verge of being investigated for the death of both that partner and a suspect, and disappeared. Nice and simple. People who couldn't take any more and just got up and walked away. I saw them every day in my job.

But Nat's apartment was pristine, untouched, full of personal possessions. Her clothes were in the closet, food was in the refrigerator, and a hungry cat was wailing to be fed. Nick Knight's desk sat untouched in its typically male sloppy splendor--but no gum wrappers, no greasy hamburger bags, no photos of friends, of family. His loft was equally full of everyday personal possessions, but mysteriously lacking, somehow. There was a sense of empty places, as if a few things too precious to leave for others to find had been removed.

I could only assume that Nat and Nick Knight had disappeared together. Nat's car was found abandoned at the airport, Knight's tuna boat was safe in his garage. Co-workers reported that the detective and the coroner were "close"--not lovers, but everyone in the station would have been more than happy to play matchmaker. Both were secretive, close-mouthed about their lives.

Both were missing.

It was generally believed that they had left together, despite the fact they had left the most rudimentary of their personal possessions behind. Nat, in quitting her job, was certainly looking to move on. Presumably, the line ran, she convinced Knight to run away with her, and imagined the two of them soaking up the tropical breeze and pina coladas in Rio.

None of that agreed with my sickening gut-level suspicion that my sister was dead.

It was a window that I had watched for nearly six years, yet this time there was a difference. The woman still had long curly light brown hair and blue eyes, still walked with the same purposeful stride. The cat was fed, the TV burbling too softly for her human ears to make out words, on, I presumed, more for noise than entertainment.

But she was not the woman I had watched for so long. She was her sister, who would not stay long. And when she left, so would I.

The good doctor was dead--or so I was told. De Brabant as well--delivered in the same dispassionate tone. Both bodies tidily disposed of, and the doctor's car left in an obvious place to deflect police attention. Carefully, deliberately, he told me everything that had occurred, punishing himself with the retelling. I held my silence, hearing more than was said, hearing the pain that he would refuse to admit to. Then he left--for where, he never said.

My responsibly for six years had been to make sure that the human woman who had discovered our kind did not reveal our existence to the world. Generally, when such an unfortunate event happens, the human in question is hypnotized or killed. But my superiors had stayed that sentence of execution. A medical examiner determined to protect her friend's secret might just be more useful alive rather than dead. I was instructed to stay in Toronto and keep an eye on her.

Now she would never reveal her secret.

My charge was to remain until every loose end was tied, until the police officially stated that Natalie Lambert had skipped town and the sister left. Then I would be free to pursue my own life--or unlife, as the case may be.

And Toronto would be left as perhaps the only major city in the world where vampires did not roam the night.

It was eerie, living a dead woman's life. I had done it before, to track killers, but never for someone I had known before they were a corpse. The first night, I couldn't bear to sleep in Nat's bed. Her bed, her sheets, her plants withering on the sill, the soap melted into a puddle from the steady drip drip of the showerhead, milk spoiling in the refrigerator. Her clothes, her computer, her books, her cat...

Sydney accepted me with surprising ease. I had never owned a pet in my life, never considered it. A cat seemed to be too much responsibility. But Sydney cuddled close and demanded attention. Apparently, pheromones were enough in his eyes--or nose--to link two sisters who had nothing else in common.

Nat and I had been butting heads for my whole life. Seven years my senior, there was too much distance between us to allow for easy communication. Richard had been two years younger than she; I had been the afterthought child, unplanned, though no less wanted for all that--or so I had been assured throughout my childhood.

But the simple fact remained that Nat and I had been too disparate in age to have much in common. When I was just starting to be self-aware, Nat was beginning her teens. When I reached the age of rebellion, she was in college, working toward her medical degree. Our father died when I was fourteen, leaving me the only child still at home. My mother's and my shaky relationship quickly disintegrated under that stress, and at seventeen I finished school and took myself off to university in the States, at Colombia. At eighteen I further proved my inveterate perverseness by choosing my father's US citizenship over my mother's Canadian, and after graduating joined the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

After that, family contact was limited to Christmases at home where I talked about my career with the FBI, Nat talked about her career with the county coroners office and Richard talked about his career as a Crown Prosecutor -- and his wife and daughter. We agreed that law enforcement seemed to be in our blood. Mom died five years after I left home, and I began to believe that perhaps as an adult I could be accepted into the family circle.

Sydney mewled angrily, flicking his claws lightly at my arm as my grip turned too strong. Then Richard was shot and killed. I was only three years out of college when Nat called me at my apartment and told me my brother had been brutally murdered. In a brusque, distracted voice, she told me that there was no point coming to Toronto, since Richard had already been buried. She had not even bothered to tell me he had been injured until he was already in the ground. Stunned and furious, I told her precisely what I thought of her actions, and slammed down the phone.

I never spoke to her again.

At some point in my investigation, it began to be apparent that any questions I wanted answered would have to come from Nick Knight. There was so little in Nat's personal effects to indicate what had happened to her, both that night and in the preceding six years. I read the suicide note and journal that Nat's friend had dumped on her, and raged with impotent fury at the woman who had selfishly unloaded everything on Nat, who had been the least likely person to be able to deal with it. But there was nothing more, no personal papers of Nat's own, nothing.

The answers, therefore, had to come from Knight, a man everyone liked and no one seemed to know. His two former partners were dead. Before that, he had worked solo. He had transferred to Toronto seven years before from Chicago, but tracking his life back that far would take time and effort, not to mention calling in a few favors. Capt. Reese knew nothing about him. Capt. Cohen had died with his former partner, Schanke. Capt. Stonetree have declined to comment past stating somewhat mysteriously that there were things in Knight's life that I simply did not want to know.

Talk about waving a red flag in front of a bull.

He lived well but paid all his bills. He was forced to shun the daylight yet his loft was filled with paintings of suns. No family, little past. Nat had been his closest friend, yet even before Richard's death she had never mentioned him to me.

The only other direction I had to follow concerned-- of all things--a nightclub. Called the Raven, it had been passed from the hands of a Janette Du Charme to those of Lucien LaCroix in the last year. Knight had visited the club on a regular basis for the past four years, presumably in a professional capacity.

I waited until nine in the evening to go to the club, assuming that it would be easier to find the owner--LaCroix--during early business hours. Unused to such places, I put on my generic little black dress and more makeup than I usually wore in a week--meaning mascara and blush.

My primping was of no use--the club was deserted. No notice, no for sale sign, just an eerie silence.

"No one's here."

It was a mark of my training that I automatically clawed for the non-existent service revolver under my arm. Sheepishly, I dropped my hand from its reflexive movement and said, "Thanks."

In the dim light from moon and streetlamps, I studied my unknown companion. Dressed simply but neatly in black jeans and a dark buttoned shirt, he stood with his hands in his pockets, watching me watch him with measuring eyes. Dark hair fell over those eyes, but did not mar their impact.

Seemingly waking from some contemplation, he took his hand and a key from his pocket and unlocked the door. The panel swung open on well-oiled hinges. I felt my mouth curve; somehow, I had been expecting a haunting creak. With a brief but surprisingly genteel wave of the hand, he silently invited me to enter. When I hesitated, he smiled. "It's a choice between staying alone on the street or coming inside with a stranger." His voice was rich and warm, flavored lightly with a French accent. I had grown up in Canada, and like any Canadian had taken Level Four French, had heard Quebecians speak accented English and purest French. Somehow, this man's voice sounded different, as though his French sprung from Europe rather than the New World.

I stepped inside the deserted club. My companion flipped on a bank of lights that probably were rarely used; they revealed the bar and dance floor with a punishing white glare rather than the dim colored pulses I would have expected. I descended to the lower level. Behind me, he started to remove the short cape I had flung over my dress. Flinching, I faced him and backed up a step or five. "Je m'appelle Joanna Lambert," I said, for some reason slipping into my schoolgirl French.

The unrelenting light revealed my companion to be wearing a deep bloodred silk shirt and to have blue eyes that pinned mine. If I had not already heard his accent, I would have assumed him to be Black Irish.

Taking my hand, he bent over it with an oddly courtly grace. "Rene Claudet. Enchante, mademoiselle."

What's the English saying? Lamb to the slaughter? Bearding the lion in his den? ~Il n'est pas.~ Unknowing, Joanna Lambert had walked into danger. Had LaCroix remained here, he would have taken her oblivious audacity poorly. She who in both looks and personality so resembled the woman who had drove his beloved son to death might not have seen the sun rise again.

In coming here, she could have easily exposed herself to her sister's danger. Had she dug too deeply into de Brabant's past while vampires thronged in Toronto, it would have been necessary to stop her. But now, there was little to find, and no one but me to betray.

Divia had seen to that. I only survived because I had never seen the inside of the Raven until de Brabant was already dead and LaCroix was ready to leave.

"M. Claudet," Joanna said softly. Switching back to brisk, no-nonsense English, she asked, "Are you the new owner?"

LaCroix had given me the key, and the responsibility. He had already eradicated any evidence of immortal lives here, but the club could not just be dumped on the market. Why? I don't know. Did LaCroix expect his erstwhile daughter to return? There was nothing to return to. No one.

"Yes," I answered her. Legally, I was the new owner. The fact that I intended to be gone from this city in a matter of days didn't matter to the bureaucrats.

"Did you know the previous owner well?" she continued.

"No." She waited for me to expand on that one-word answer, and finally turned away when she realized I wasn't going to continue. She crossed to the bar and I followed. Ever the cordial host, I said, "I would offer you something to drink, but..." I gestured to the cooling unit that had recently held a decapitated corpse.

She knew what had happened; her lips tightened and she turned away. Idly, she wandered the room, touching the curtain of chains, setting them to swaying.

"You aren't going to reopen the club, are you?"

Her perceptiveness surprised me somewhat, but I answered her honestly. "No."

"Why?" This time, it was her one-word question that caught me off-guard.

"I am merely an intermediary here. I have no desire to run a club."

She looked at me through the chains. "So you will sell it?"

"Yes." Lie. The Raven would be held until the next century--and the next, should it come to that.

"You bought it as an investment?"

"Yes."

She struck the chains with her fist, frustrated at my closed mouth policy. "I'm sorry, Miss Lambert. I don't know anything to help you." Another lie. I had every answer to every question she had, but for both our sakes I dared not reveal them.

Her shoulders straightened at the formal address, and the brief glimpse of anger was firmly suppressed. "I'm sorry I took up your time, M. Claudet, and I thank you for your patience."

"~De rien.~ I only wish I could help you more."

Truth.

Dead end.

All ends are dead, though. Life ends in death, and that is all that can be said.

I smacked myself on the head with a newspaper and flopped onto the couch. I was getting disgustingly morbid. Why did this matter so much to me? Nat was dead. I could do nothing for her. It was not my responsibility to find out the how and why of her death.

But I was the only one who was searching for the truth. Except that every line I followed was swallowed up and disappeared. Pulling myself off the couch, I went back to the computer, to the open file I had put together for Nat's case. There was frustratingly little there. I had checked through the File Manager on Nat's computer, looking for personal writings, an electronic journal, as it were. There was nothing there.

Except for several thousand K worth of memory not accounted for.

Suddenly excited, I pulled up a chair and tried to access the files through DOS. A box popped up, requiring a password.

Two hours later, I gave up. I had typed in family names, birth dates, childhood pets, medical terms until I was dizzy. I finally accessed a an FTP site using my official code and retrieved a program that would run combinations of letters and numbers to break through the password. I set it up and went to get a cup of coffee. By the time I got back, the password had appeared on the screen.

Jo.

Nat had chosen my nickname for the password.

I sat in front of the screen, setting down my coffee cup when the hot liquid slopped over onto my shaking hand. I had thought that I barely registered in Nat's life, in her mind. Since Richard's death, she had made no effort to contact me. Yet I was on her mind every time she worked on her computer. It made my head spin.

I mastered my scattered emotions enough to start looking through the files, arranged chronologically and going back some six years. Within five minutes I put my head down on the desk and moaned.

For six years, Nat had been trying to cure Knight of being a vampire. My sister had gone insane.

Five people had died from exsanguination in a case in 1992. Three were homeless and had been murdered by a vengeful hospital worker. He died, and his blood had evaporated (evaporated?) in a fire.

The murderer of a museum guard, however, was never found.

A year ago, in a panic over an asteroid, the morgues were filled with bodies. Some of them had been drained of their blood. No one was ever charged with those deaths.

In February, two bodies were found in the lockers of a bus station. Drained. The case was still open.

Putting the files down on Knight's desk, I rubbed my eyes. I really didn't want to hear this. It was easier to take Nat's painstaking files of meticulous research as the ravings of a madwoman. My only question had been if Knight had shared her madness or if he had been the unknowing object of her medical fantasies.

I knew too much about how people died. I had kept calm and quiet in the presence of their bodies, even when the death had been particularly brutal. I knew the deaths described in the files on the desk before me were not natural. The wounds were inconsistent with the blood lost. And in almost every case there was an explanation from Nat that covered the abnormality. Individually, they worked. Taken together, however, they became less and less convincing.

As if Nat were covering up an undeniable truth.

If she really was crazy and believed that vicious bloodsuckers roamed the night, wouldn't she have exploited these deaths, used these cases to prove her point? Instead, she had disguised them. As if she were protecting something. Or someone.

Not for nothing had Sherlock Holmes been my idol growing up. The line about, "Once you have eliminated the impossible, whatever left is, no matter how improbable, must be the truth," had been quoted until it became trite, but it was still true. In my own work I reversed it, not excluding anything until it was justifiably impossible.

So I had to face the idea that vampires existed.

The proof for that theory was piling up. The cases on my desk. Knight's repeated "incredible" acts of valor. Nat's detailed, exacting medical notes...

Unable to bear any more, I stood up and gathered my coat to go out into the failing light. Thinking of the notes I read the night before made a strange ache tighten in my throat. At first, they were brisk and businesslike, referring to "the subject." Slowly, though, personality--of both the doctor and the patient--broke through. "The subject can't inject fluids other than blood--the body refuses it," gave way to, "I've never seen anyone make such a fuss about little things like drinking tea." Gradually, in the midst of the medical reports, I began to find the rudiments of the private journal I had hoped to find. Certainly it was unplanned and limited to her research--to Nick Knight. But it was unexpectedly revealing.

And then Richard was shot. For two days, no entries were put on the record. Then, Nat wrote, "Nick gave into my pleas and saved Richard by bringing him across. Now I have two patients under my care, two men to find a cure for. We had to stage a funeral for Richard quickly, so no one could ever find out that there was no body in the coffin. I called Jo--what to tell her? Sarah will keep this secret, but Jo has a stubborn honesty streak. I had to tell her Richard was dead and buried. She wasn't pleased. I'll leave it up to Richard to decide what she should know."

Three days passed before Nat wrote again. "Richard is dead. Every one of Nick's predictions came true. But I didn't listen, refused to listen. I was so sure that I was right. Sarah has been made to forget that day when Richard attacked her and me, but I won't. I can't. I wish I could."

At that point I blinked irritably. I had left the curtains on the window open last night to catch the moonlight, and the sun was rising, shining into my eyes. I had been up the whole night reading Nat's files. Exhausted, I had stumbled to bed, rising late to go to the station to look at the files of Nick's cases over the past seven years. And finding that, rather than refuting Nat's "research," it only supported it.

But--vampires? I was still a long way from buying that explanation.

The sun had set by the time I had bought Sydney and myself dinner and returned to Nat's apartment, changing out of my power suit for a comfortably ratty pair of shorts and an equally aged t-shirt. The cat ate his meal and then crossed to where I was standing at the window and rubbed adoringly against my ankles. I had no idea what to do with him. I didn't have time for a life of my own, let alone a pet. Suddenly, the thought reminded me of Lora Haynes' journal, and I swept Sydney up into my arms, cuddling my cheek against the sleek fur. Lora Haynes had killed herself, Nat was missing (dead, I knew she was dead, through a link I never wanted to acknowledge)--and myself? What of my life?

Could I blame Nat for going over the edge into insanity, lost in the romance of elegant predators of the night? We both knew death could be an ugly thing--what harm could there be in dressing it up in prettier clothes?

"You're losing it, Lambert," I told my reflection in the window. "Vampires. Yeah, right."

I let Sydney fall from my arms to hit the floor with his lithe grace and went to bed.

~Sang du Christ.~ The old curse came to my mind, oddly appropriate. Swearing by the blood of the Savior was not a childhood habit--I had sworn then in the coarse argot of a Parisian streetchild--but something I had aped from my master, in an effort to forget that grimy bastard thief without a name and with no future other than a squalid life and a miserable death.

He had saved me from that, my master. He came to the jail the night before I was to be hanged for theft and murder, and gave me a choice--death or eternal life. I cursed him, thinking he lied to torment me, until his eyes glowed gold and his teeth sunk into my neck, draining away the life that would have been broken the next day anyway. And then I understood that he meant what he had offered, that eternal life was within my grasp, and I fought for it, fought *him,* greedily draining him of blood in my search for strength. His was still greater than mine, and he broke free. We escaped from the jail before the sun arose, and hidden in the dark from its light, my master told me what I was, what I had become.

Except that I never was quite what he wanted. I have no quarrel with my life, with what he had made me. But I accepted control from no one, and he wanted to make me into his dark disciple, a immortal parrot, a mirror to reflect his own image. But I had no knowledge of how to bend, I held or broke. Enraged at his failure, he tried to destroy me.

Instead, I destroyed him.

For that crime, I could have justifiably been executed by my kind. Instead, I was approached by the very group I should have run from--the Enforcers. I was a rouge, unknown in the Community due to my master's obsessive desire to control and mold my existence. I was either their enemy or a part of them. They offered me a choice--death or joining their ranks.

How could they have known--how could *I* have known--that such an offer would mean so much to me? Nameless, homeless, now masterless, I had nothing to belong to and nothing to call my own. Upholding the laws of the Community, being a part in the most intimate way possible... it was beyond anything I had ever dreamed. For three hundred years I accepted my responsibilities with joy. Lives touched mine rarely, mostly only when I was required to end them, either as an execution for a vampire breaking our laws, or as protection when a mortal found out about us and could not be made to forget. If no one loved me, at least they could not ignore me.

Invariably, the wonder and glory of it began to fade. I realized I was little more than a petty thug. The false intimacy of power and death soured. When I began to refuse to preform assignments, my superiors asked me for one last task, one, they said scornfully, that would not tax my newly awakened conscience. I was sent to Toronto to watch over a woman who had discovered that LaCroix's mad son was a vampire, and to make sure that she relayed that information to no one else. I was to let no one else in Toronto know of my presence. Not Janette Du Charme, LaCroix's daughter, not any of the other vampires who drifted through Toronto and certainly not de Brabant.

When I was done, I would be free.

My blasphemous curse was still ringing in my ears. Natalie Lambert was dead, as was Nicholas de Brabant. I should have finally had my liberty. But now Joanna Lambert had done the unthinkable. She had taken whatever scant information was available after I had cleaned out her sister's apartment and impossibly had discerned the truth.

I knew what I must do. To gain my own freedom, I had to make her forget.

Or failing that, kill her.

"I'm in love with him. God, I'm a fool."

Restless, I left the computer and prowled about the apartment. I had tried to sleep, but had been lured back to the story that was unfolding before my eyes. Nat's medical files were increasingly laced with personal observations about Nick. Maybe it had been inevitable that she would fall in love with him, I don't know. But I knew my sister, she would have done her best to hide it, to deny it, to bury deep where it couldn't hurt her. And Nick, lost in his own world of darkness, would have wanted to keep her safe, keep her away...

Damn! I realized I was doing it again, assuming that Nat was not insane, assuming that vampires existed and that Knight had been one of them. A whole cast was assembling in my head, Nick, Janette, LaCroix... a fantastic story, a fairy tale, a creation of a highly imaginative and insane mind.

But Nat had never been fanciful, not even as a child. I could not imagine her making all this up, no matter how far over the edge she had gone. Which left...

"Once you have eliminated the impossible, whatever left is, no matter how improbable, must be the truth." I muttered my own panacea aloud.

"Indeed. So now what do we do?"

At first I thought I was imagining the question in response to my quote. But why would my subconscious speak with a slight French accent?

Rene was standing just inside the French doors I had been brooding by earlier that evening. I could feel the chill of realization slide down my body.

Vampires existed. Undeniable fact.

And he was one of them.

This time, I didn't claw for my gun. When had my reflexes shifted, from agent to sister? When had my priorities changed? "Did he kill her? Knight. Did Knight kill my sister?" I didn't remember shaping the words, but they came from me, compelling, drawing on something within me, clawing out, making me bleed. I didn't want to know. I needed to know.

"Mlle Lambert--" He began to walk toward me.

"DID HE KILL MY SISTER?"

Rene stopped. "It's not that easy."

"It is easy. Yes. No. Choose one, and give me an answer."

Suddenly he stood in front of me, his hand lightly circling my neck. He was taller than me, especially in my bare feet. Vampire. Killer. Drinker of blood. It might mean my life to challenge him, but I had to know. I had to know the truth.

I tried to step back, but his grip immobilized me. "Ah, so now you realize your danger. You didn't understand what you were walking into, Joanna Lambert. Now you do. ~Vraiment,~ do you want answers?"

"Yes." Without thought, still drawing on that thing deep inside of me. It was love. Love for my sister whom I had not known until she was dead. Nat was all I had left, and this was all I had left of Nat.

Abruptly, he let me go. "Get dressed," he snapped. Out of the depths of my own confusion, I heard the anger in his tone, and wondered.

"I want--"

"I know what you want. And I know that I should kill you now and end this. Get dressed. You'll get your answers."

I retreated to the bedroom to change out of my ragged shorts and t-shirt into jeans. I didn't know where he was going to take me, but I knew better than to challenge an angry vampire.

I'd get my answers. But would those answers end in my death?

I got my answers. Now, the question was living with them.

I left Toronto the next day. In the sunlight. I made sure of that. I cleared out everything I could from the files that would point to the conclusions I had drawn, and wiped Nat's computer clean. The captain was surprised that I dropped my personal crusade to discover where my sister had gone, but seemed to believe me when I said that if she had walked away from her life, it was by her choice, and that I would honor that choice.

Had it been her choice? In the end, had she known how much she was losing? Had she been afraid? I had stood in Nick's loft, listened while Rene had told me how and why -- and still not understood. A hand was clenched in my throat; I couldn't breathe. Tears burned in my eyes, blurring my vision. I almost thought I could see Nat with Nick, standing by the windows, pleading for love, for a chance to be together.

Why was I being haunted by a line of poetry? I barely remembered the rest of the poem; it hadn't been my favorite class. And Yeats was much too moody for me.

But in my mind's ear, I kept hearing, "Things fall apart, the center cannot hold..."

And maybe that's how it should be. Maybe the center, the focus, the thing to which we cling so desperately should *not* always and forever remain the same. To let that happen would be to stagnate, to rot away, to wither and die.

"...the blood-dimmed tide is loosened..."

There had been no blood on the floor, where she had died. Where he had given up his life. Their lives would stand as no memorial. They had fought, suffered, struggled -- and, in the end, had not even the solace of an ephemeral reward. That was all. After a hundred years of searching for a cure, after six years with Nat, that was all. They died. Nothing more.

There would be no understanding it. There would be no resolution.

It hurt, to think that happy endings only happened in the movies. We can fool ourselves so completely, to believe that we have a right to happiness. We have no right to life, let alone joy.

What we have then, every breath we draw, every rapture that brightens our sight, is a gift.

"...mere anarchy is loosed on the world. The ceremony of innocence is drowned, the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity."

Which is why I quit my job, loaded my practical little sedan with clothes and Sydney, and headed out on a cross-country trip. Maybe there aren't any answers out there. Maybe all I'll find at the end of my journey is a worn-out car, a whimpering bank account, and a sense that I've just tossed everything away for nothing.

No. Not nothing. For the chance of something new, different, bright, joyful.

For life.

I thought that when I took her to the loft, when I told her in excruciating detail about how her sister died, about how hope was dead and dreams a useless longing, that it would be over, and I, finally, after so many years, would be free.

I was both right and wrong.

It was over, all of it. There were no more secrets to keep, nothing to stay me in Toronto. I was free of the obligations that the Enforcers had charged me with for so many years. I could now do as I pleased, without care or let.

But I couldn't forget that there was one other person who knew exactly what had happened that night. And through her, I finally understood the two people I had been watching for so long. There was a kind of ruined nobility in their destruction, in their futile hopes for a future that no longer existed. To have the courage to try was rare. To have the courage to face the consequences was nearly unheard of.

This, I knew better than anyone.

Did she know, did she guess, that I watched her from a distance, as I had for so long watched her sister?

It was not over. Not so long as I remembered.

FINIS

I give permission to archive this to whomever wishes to.

Thanks everyone. It's been fun. <g>

Lizbet ~*~ lizbet@primenet.com ~ Lizbetann@aol.com

SunS List Co-Mummy: "If the Apocalypse comes, beep me."

<http://www.primenet.com/~lizbet/>

"One of the major disadvantages to lusting after a vampire is the fact that the opportunities to see them in swim trunks are rare...." -- Perri

WARNING: This story contains *third season* information, and contains violence which may not be suitable for children. Here there be dragons...

Blood Hunt
by Jan Cox

"Damn it!" The small brown haired woman rubbed futility at her numb fingers. This morning the radio has promised a brief respite from the oncoming fall chill, and so she'd left her gloves at home. Now it was almost dark, and the wind snatched greedily at the remaining warmth in her exposed fingers and ears. Carefully setting down the bag of supplies, Angie bent down and retrieved the keys.

A moment later the big door swung inward and she sighed with relief as the warm air brushed at her face. The heater was on, as were the lights in the back. The lights over the bar were off, and the strong smell of gin filled the air. Underneath the gin there was another odor, not immediately recognizable.

"Mister LaCroix? Joe?"

The only reply was the dripping of a faucet over at the bar and the gentle hiss of the central heater. Carefully locking the door behind her, Angie crossed the darkened room, pausing to set down the bag near the door marked Employees Only.

"Joe?"

Nothing.

She sighed dramatically. "I swear, if you've been hitting the sauce, the boss is going to kill you. Give me a hand with this stuff, will you? I picked up more nuts, but I really don't know why we bother. Half the time the stuff just goes stale. Never seen a place where the customers ignore the free lunch before..."

Angie set the nuts down with a disgusted bang.

"Hey, no kidding, you'd better get it together. The boss'll be in soon, and that is one dude you don't want to piss off.

"Joe?"

Sounds of water dripping at the bar, but no reply. Angie fumbled for the light switches which would light the bar itself.

"C'mon, this isn't funny. This place is creepy enough without you--" Her diatribe cut off in mind stream, Angie tried to scream but all that squeezed from her throat was a whispery "hhaaa" as her feet took unwilling steps away from whatever--whoever--was on the bar.

"Oh my God..."

#####

"Oh my God."

"Why don't you step outside, Tracy? See if anyone saw something."

Tracy Vetter shook her head resolutely. "No, I'm fine, really. It just...I haven't seen anything this bad before. I'll be fine."

Nick Knight took in his new partner's pale, green-tinged complexion and mentally rolled his eyes. "Sure you will. I just thought you needed some fresh air."

"Nick? I think you should see this."

Knight gave Tracy one last look, then turned toward the body on the bar. Natalie was kneeling at one end, her feet and knees narrowly avoiding the pooling blood.

"Have you ever seen anything like this? I've seen weird, but this is..."

She paused as Tracy approached.

"What's up?" The young detective looked determinedly professional.

"Well, I was about to tell Nick that this woman wasn't tied down with ropes." She lifted a red, sticky coil from one pale ankle with a wooden examination stick. "Never seen someone tied down with their own intestines, before. Thrifty fellow, this one."

"Ooohph. Nick, I think I'll...go talk to the crowd outside." Tracy turned and walked unsteadily toward the front doors, now propped open.

"That wasn't very nice."

"She'll get used to it. We all do."

"Indeed. Nicolas, might I have a word with you?" LaCroix, whom the patrolmen had kindly introduced to Nick as the bar's owner, was standing behind them.

Nick nodded briefly. "Nat?"

"Don't worry about me. I'll be here for a while yet." The coroner turned back toward the figure on the bar. "This looks like the beginning of a very long night."

"You know, of course, that this little matter must be cleared up as soon as possible."

The two men had walked away from the crowd of police, forensics experts and photographers that surround every violent death like flies over rotting meat. They paused at the rear wall, where LaCroix leaned casually against the black stone.

Nick nodded. "The captain has put several of us on it already. Any time there's a case like this, the media starts in right away, and that kind of attention always makes things worse."

"That isn't the attention that I'm concerned with. What does concern me, Nicolas, is that this woman was found here, in this manner, and with that particular message." He gestured abruptly toward the bar.

"Pain is fleeting. Blood is eternal.' Yes, that does look bad. Is there any chance that..."

"That one of our own would do something so foolish? Come, come, Nicolas, none of us are that foolhardy. They would not dare" he added softly. For a moment LaCroix's true face appeared, then the murderous predator was replaced by a look of arrogant disinterest.

"I'll admit it seems unlikely, but..."

"But, of course, anything is possible. Yes, I will make inquiries. But you won't find your killer here, Nicolas." The older man turned away, then paused.

"And Nicolas? If you intend to play by mortal rules of justice, see that you find him first."

Wonderful. With LaCroix seeking vengeance for the inconvenience of having to redecorate, a very nasty case was about to get nastier. Nick shook his head wearily, and headed back toward the crime scene. Just being in The Raven was painful now that Janette had moved on, and that dull ache was accompanied by pity for the young woman displayed like a side of beef on its long, wooden bar.

The call came in about four hours ago from a nearly hysterical head waitress named Angie Delgado. She had been hired by LaCroix to take care of the tedious details of running a downtown nightclub, and was now at St. Thomas', sleeping the sleep of the heavily medicated. Miss Delgado had not been too useful, having come in after the killer had made his presentation and left, but she had stated that the door was locked, and that there had been no sign of break-in. And since LaCroix did not follow Janette's habit of sleeping in the attached private quarters, there was no one to hear as the killer eviscerated and then tied the young woman to the oaken bar. He had then taken his time with her, pausing only to paint the cryptic message on the bar's mirror with the victim's own blood. The look on her face was...disquieting.

She had lived much longer than she could possibly have wished to.

####

Tracy was back when he returned to the bar, patiently lifting prints from the bar's smooth, waxed surface. She was overseen by Jack Thompson, one of the department's forensics experts. At Nick's inquiring look he nodded, pursing his lips in surprise. Tracy was doing okay.

Natalie approached him, taking off her stained latex gloves.

"Nick, we're going to take her downtown. I don't think we're going to get much more here."

Nick nodded. "Have you been able to establish the cause of death?"

"Well, gee, I don't know. Maybe it was the shock and blood loss from the skin he took, or maybe from he cut her from stem to stern and removed most of her internal organs. Could've been the impromptu cardioectomy. Or maybe it was pulling her finger and toenails that was the straw that broke--" she stopped abruptly, putting one trembling hand over her eyes. "I'm sorry, Nick. I guess this one's getting to me, a little."

He put a comforting hand on her shoulder. "I know. No matter how often we see it, violent death is never easy to deal with. Especially when..."

"When they've been tortured," she finished wearily. "I can't give you anything definite, but I'd put death at about five hours ago, due to traumatic blood loss and shock. Give me a couple of hours and I can be a little more precise."

"All right." He squeezed her shoulder briefly before releasing it. "I'll call you later, huh?"

"Hold it!" The sharp voice that brought their heads around belonged to a tall, dark haired woman, who gestured peremptorily to the attendants who had been rolling out the victim's body. She bent and quickly unzipped the body bag, seemed satisfied with what she saw.

"Can I help you?" Natalie moved first, stepping angrily between the body and the stranger. "This is a police investigation. I'm afraid you'll have to wait outside."

The woman gave Nat a calm, measuring look.

"I need to speak to whoever's in charge here."

"That would be me." Nick flashed his shield. "Detective Knight, homicide. And you are...?"

"Keller. RCMP violent crimes."

"I wasn't aware that the department had called you in, Agent Keller."

"They didn't." She gave him another long, measuring stare, then turned toward the bar. "Nice work. Have you identified the victim yet?"

"Not yet. Her purse is missing, and getting a good set of prints is going to be...tricky."

"Generally is, when the killer cuts off the pads of all their fingers. Who discovered the body?"

"We have her. And you haven't explained what you're doing here, Agent Keller." Knight put one hand on her arm and held it firmly. "We've got the situation under control, I can assure you. Perhaps you'd like to explain how you heard about this so fast."

Keller irritably turned to face him. "This case belongs to us. I've been tracking this guy across half of Canada, and believe me I know his signature. And I'll thank you, detective, to take your hand off me." She coolly reached over and placed her right hand over his where it still rested on her arm.

Contact.

Nick jumped slightly and pulled his hand away as a shiver of something cold ran through him. Keller didn't react immediately, instead staring blankly at nothing before slowly bringing her eyes up to meet his. Her eyes narrowed speculatively, even as her left hand slowly massaged her right.

"Nick? Are you okay?" Nat's concerned voice brought him back to reality.

"It's nothing. I was, just explaining jurisdiction to Agent Keller."

"Yes." Keller took a step backward. "I'll see that you have the appropriate paperwork by morning. In the mean time," she broke eye contact with difficulty, "I'll need to see whatever your people have picked up here, and a copy of the coroner's report ASAP." Her eyes returned inexorably to Nick's face. "Our man's not done here yet. We've got another day or two of fun and games before he moves on." She shook her head and turned to face the bar. "I expect I'll be here for a while. Can I reach you at the precinct, detective?"

"I'm off at six, but I'll be in tomorrow night."

"Then I'll see you then."

"What was that all about?"

"I think she knows, Nat."

"Who the killer is? What makes you say that?"

Nick looked briefly over at Tracy, who was perched on the end of his car, deep in thought over her notepad. He lowered his voice.

"I think she knows what I am."

###

"Captain, I need to talk to you." As Reese looked up, Nick walked in and closed the door behind him. "It's about the murder at The Raven. I know that the RCMP is claiming jurisdiction, but I really think that the case needs a local angle..."

Reese sighed. "Come in, Detective Knight. Have a seat." He gestured magnanimously toward the chair Nick was leaning over. "I know which case you're talking about. We ID'd the lady after you went off shift." He slid a file across the desk. "Lady was one Danielle Correlli, 24, single, and a nanny, if you can believe that. Didn't think they still had nannies, for God's sake. We ID'd her through a missing persons report."

"How long had she been missing?" Knight looked up curiously.

"Her employer reported it when she didn't appear for work yesterday morning." The captain frowned.

"But she hadn't been missing even 24 hours yet. Why did Missing Persons...oh."

"You got that right. Miss Correlli just happens to have been the nanny for Jessie and Ryan Gershwin."

"Children of one Frank Gershwin, mayor of Toronto" Nick finished.

"That's two for you. So now we've got the mayor's office jumping up and down, not to mention the usual noise from our friends in the media. Lord, don't they just love the messy ones. Everyone's looking to us, and what do we get, but a visit from the RCMP."

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about. I think it would be a good idea if one of us was assigned to the investigation. To provide a local angle, coordinate precinct activities, that sort of thing." Nick leaned forward, meeting his captain's eyes. He disliked influencing mortals unnecessarily, but this was certainly necessary. A moment to concentrate, and...

"And that makes three. It would appear that our esteemed colleagues over at RCMP agree with you. I just spoke to Agent Keller, and we got everything set up. She's going to brief each shift, starting with the night shift. Briefing's in fifteen minutes, so don't waste any more time talking to me.

"And Knight? I understand you met Keller last night. Any comments?"

"Not really, Captain. She seems professional enough. Any reason?"

Reese grinned. "I guess you made quite an impression on the lady. She asked for you by name."

###

"Can I help you?" Natalie Lambert wasn't quite able to keep the irritation out of her voice as she greeted the RCMP officer she and Nick had met last night. Nick seemed to think the woman was some sort of psychic, but has been less than forthcoming in telling Nat just what he thought the woman knew. (As if that was anything new.)

Too many years of keeping secrets had made Nick tightlipped enough that sometimes the urge to just -shake- the answers out of him was nearly insurmountable. As usual, Nick was cryptic and Nat was on her own. Reaching up, she switched off the recorder which took her verbal autopsy notes.

"Yes. I need to see the autopsy report on the Correlli woman." The taller woman looked blandly at Nat, as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened last night. Wordlessly, Natalie handed over the report.

Keller nodded, then began scanning the pages immediately. After a couple of minutes, Natalie sighed loudly.

"Agent Keller, do you need me for anything? My patients are getting antsy."

That seemed to get her attention.

"By all means. I'll need to see the body, of course."

"Of course. Third one from the end. There's a box of latex gloves to your right."

"Mmm." Keller nodded absently, already back to the careful details of Danielle Correlli's death.

Natalie shrugged mentally. Nothing out of the ordinary here. Personality had never been a requirement for service with the RCMP...

When Natalie next looked up, she was surprised to see that nearly an hour had passed without interruption. Even the departure of Agent Keller hadn't shook her concentration. That thought lead naturally to the body of Danielle Correlli, lying still in bay three. Natalie headed over on autopilot, already mentally laying out her final report. She rounded the corner file cabinet that had bitten her shins on numerous occasions without a blink and stepped directly up to the body.

"I'm cold...so cold."

The whisper was thin, pitiful, and soft as a (voice from the grave?) child's.

"Ahh!" Even as she gasped and stumbled a panicky step backward, Natalie cursed herself for reacting like an intern. Bodies don't talk. Or whisper.

(Nick's did) Her traitorous mind reminded her.

Belatedly she realized that the sound hadn't come from the body's head, but from the side. Standing still as stone, her face pale and waxy, was Agent Keller, her hand tightly grasping Ms. Correlli's left hand.

"Agent Keller?" Natalie took a hesitant step forward.

(Oh, this is weirder than snake shoes)

"Agent Keller?" she repeated. "Are you all right?"

The dark haired woman blinked rapidly, her breath coming in several short sips before settling into a normal sinus rhythm. Her free hand went absently to her hair, smoothing a rebellious stand into place.

Abruptly she looked up at Nat. Absolutely calm.

"Did you say something, Dr. Lambert?"

"Yes" Natalie said warily. "Are you okay? You looked a little rocky there for a minute." (There's an understatement) Natalie added mentally. "Did you say something about...being cold?"

"I said it looked like -she- was kept cold," Keller said smoothly. Your report doesn't mention it, but I found small amounts of tissue damage in the extremities, and signs of drying in the mucous membranes and lips."

"All of which are consistent with exposure. It's cold outside, Ms. Keller. I didn't find any evidence to suggest that there was anything unusual in sustaining cold exposure symptoms in winter in Toronto.

There's nothing here," Natalie tapped the table lightly for emphasis, "to indicate otherwise. And that's what goes in my report."

"Of course, Doctor. I didn't mean to question your findings." She handed Natalie back the case file.

"If you'll forward your findings on to our office, I'm sure that will be sufficient for our records. I'll leave you a number where I can be reached, if you come up with anything else." Keller handed her a business card with a cellular phone number scribbled on the back, then turned to leave.

"Oh, and Doctor?" Keller paused, then looked over her shoulder. A mischievous grin flicked briefly across her face, then was gone. "She -was- kept in the cold."

The double doors swept shut behind her while Natalie was still trying to formulate her reply.

###

"...Keeps them prisoner for several hours before beginning his work. He picks them up within two hours of dusk, then gets down to business at roughly dawn. Time of death is from two to six hours later. He's getting better at prolonging his pleasure, so we're looking at an TOD of about eighteen hours from pick up on the next one. We don't know what he's doing to them during the night, but the depleted levels of epinephrine found in the bodies suggests that the torture and death was just the end of a really bad day.

"Any description?" Nick asked inquiringly.

"Pretty standard. While male, thirties or forties, medium build." Keller nodded at their responding groans. "We've got witnesses that rented him a room in three cases, and each one of 'em has a different take on the guy. We know he's about 6 foot tall and 180-185 pounds, but he's worn a wig and/or contact lenses when setting up his rentals, so we've got nothing there. He doesn't leave bodily fluids behind, so we've got no blood type."

"So what do we have?" Tracy asked impatiently. "If the RCMP has been working on this case for three months, you must have put together something."

"Yes," Keller replied, coolly meeting Tracy's eyes. "We know his victims are white, generally middle-class, very respectable. They tend to dress conservatively, and in one case the gentleman was a priest. We know he picks them up shortly after dark, and that he keeps them prisoner for several hours, which means he's got a place nearby which is private and soundproof. We know he'll choose one more victim here in Toronto before he tries to move on.

"We also know that he's broken his routine. His last victim was left in a local nightclub, where all of his previous kills were left in an unused space: an unrented apartment, an empty warehouse, places like that. Something made him change his pattern, and I'm going to find out what.

"In the mean time," she concluded, dropping off the edge of the desk she'd been sitting on, "we're asking all patrols to keep an eye on things in the area around the club, and near the churches and

libraries. You've got copies of the police artist's sketch. What I need from you is your eyes. This guy's not superman. He's rented an apartment, he's got to eat, he's got to clean up his messes. Keep me informed, and I'll be out of your hair as soon as possible."

"Any questions?" she looked blandly at Tracy. "Was that clear enough, detective?"

"That's it? You're just going to wait for him to kill again?" Tracy asked incredulously.

Keller walked lazily across the room toward Tracy and Nick.

"Why, yes, detective. Heck, if we caught 'em before they killed anybody, why, there wouldn't even -be- a homicide department, and then where would we be?" Keller's voice had dropped to a dangerous drawl, and Nick could see the other officers watching avidly. Even cops like to see a little blood drawn sometimes...

Nick dropped one hand on Tracy's shoulder as she opened her mouth to reply.

"Why don't we head down to the car? You did say that you wanted us to check on the local churches, right? Late mass will be getting out soon." As he spoke Nick looked around at the other officers, who began to file out of the squadroom.

"I just think that we could be doing more," Tracy continued stubbornly. "What about a decoy? You said yourself that we know his type. We could get some of our undercover people..." she trailed off as Keller shook her head.

"We tried that twice. He hasn't taken the bait."

"He must be psychic," Nick said lightly. As he said it he watched the RCMP woman carefully, but her only response was an irritated glance shot in his direction before she began to collect her notes.

"Or just smart. Most cops have got a look...too tough, not, I don't know, victimish enough."

"Tried it yourself, did you?" Nick grinned. To his surprise, she returned it ruefully.

"Sure. Spent all night cruising the churches and late-night libraries. Got sore feet and five illicit proposals. He's just too smart for that," she repeated.

"Still, it seems like our best shot," Tracy persisted. "If we use someone local, someone who looks like a housewife or a student more than a cop..." she trailed off. "Why are you guys looking at me like that?"

###

"My feet hurt."

Tracy's voice came through the wire clearly.

"Guys? You still there?"

Nick reached forward and pressed the 'send' button.

"We're here, Tracy. Why don't you just stay there. You could read your book, look distracted."

Tracy sighed. "Yeah, that sounds good. I think we're coming up zero, here, guys."

Keller leaned back in the Caddie's passenger seat and rolled her head over toward Nick. She began to open her mouth, but Knight beat her to it.

"It's the sign of a noble mind not to say, 'I told you so'."

"That's something I've never been accused of having." She stretched, then looked at her watch.

"It's almost midnight. If he was going to hit tonight, he would have by now."

"You're right. Why don't we give it a few more minutes, then I'll drop you back off at the station. You can get a fresh start in the morning."

She grimaced, whether in response to the idea or to the cold coffee she was sipping, he couldn't be sure. "No, I've still got work to do tonight."

They sat in silence for several minutes, watching Tracy pretend to study at a bus stop. Keller finished her coffee with a look of disgust and began to idly twist a strand of rosary beads through her fingers. Lost in thought, she didn't see Nick's look of surprise and wariness as the beads began to wend between her fingers.

"You're Catholic?" Nick said, forcing his voice to a calm he didn't feel. After last night's eerie experience, he'd been sure that Keller was sensitive, that she'd picked up on at least a part of what he was. And now this no-nonsense officer was casually playing with her rosary, after first ensuring that they'd be alone together...

"Eh? Oh, no," she shook her head decisively. "A pair just like these was found at the scene of the last murder," (-this pair-, as a matter of fact,) she added mentally. "I need to know how this guy thinks, what his motivations are. We find out why he does it, we'll know when and who before he hits again."

"So why do you do it, Nick?"

"Do what? Go around killing coeds?" He nodded out to where Tracy was sitting, straining to keep his voice light.

She grinned politely, but the smile never reached her mouth.

"Why are you a cop? You've got a condition which severely limits your hours. You don't make friends much within the department or without. You prefer to work alone. And you certainly don't need the money. What makes you tick, Nick?"

"You've certainly done your homework. Checking up on me?"

She shook her head dismissively. "Just like to know who I'm working with."

(Now why don't I believe that?) Nick shrugged casually.

"And here I don't even know your first name." He half-turned in his seat so that he was facing her directly. "Don't you trust be, Agent Keller?" He pushed out mentally, seeking the mind behind those questioning eyes.

(Hard blackness, unyielding. Behind it, something shifted, stirred. The predator awakening.)

"Nick? Hey, guys?" The next thing Nick knew, Tracy's voice filled the interior of his car, and Keller was looking at him curiously.

"You going to answer that, or should I?"

"I've got it. Yes, Tracy?"

"I'm about ready to call it for tonight. What do you think, partner?"

"Sounds good. I'll pull around the corner to the north. Meet us there in five minutes."

"You got it. See you in a minute."

What happened? Nick knew from long experience that many sensitives were resistors to one extent or another, but never in eight hundred years had he felt anything quite like that. Her mind was like an obsidian blade: sharp, cold, and utterly black. Blank? No, her shielding was good, but it was more than that.

She was a hunter.

SLAM!

The loud noise jolted him from his reverie. Many years as a cop brought his right hand to his shoulder holster before he had consciously identified the sound as the slamming of his passenger side door. Keller was standing outside, leaning in through the open window.

"Think I'm going to hang around, see what I can pick up. Why don't you take Tracy and hit the all-night book store? I'll give you a call if I come up with anything."

Nick recovered quickly. "Sure. I've got a few things to check out myself. You going to make it back all right?"

"I'll try not to get mugged. And Nick? It's Sam."

"Sam?" he looked at her blankly.

"Samantha. You know, my name?"

"Right. I caught that." Nick grinned, and released a long, slow breath.

"What a detective. See you tomorrow night, Knight."

The killer watched as the blond woman jumped into the Cadillac, which then pulled smoothly back onto the street and toward police headquarters. Young and sweet, that one. She would cry and plead, of course. They always did. Learning to appreciate the transitory pain, to see beyond it to the dark realm waiting, took time. He would spend many hours patiently instructing her, and in the end she would see. She would see not with her weak mortal eyes, but with eyes opened through pain to see the Dark Lord who waited just beyond... Thinking of how it would be caused a chill of anticipation to run through him. She would learn her lesson well.

But not just yet.

The Man, now... Shadows enveloped that one, shadows like he'd seen only time before. The Man's mission was surely like his own. He would understand why Azoth had made the offering of entente the night before. Perhaps he would even warn The Man about the one who watched Azoth but did not learn. Perhaps.

"So this police officer may be a threat to us. How untrusting of you, Nicolas. Perhaps there is hope for you yet. So tell me, what do you intend to do about it?"

LaCroix leaned forward to rest his elbows on the table in his private recording studio, his fingers neatly steeping themselves between them. His eyebrows raised in a parody of innocence, LaCroix waited patiently for his progeny's excuses.

"I don't know. She checked out my record, and it looks like Merlin's work held up. And she's here to catch a killer, not look for vampires. She was much calmer tonight. I'm hoping that she'll just let it go, pass it off as nerves" Even as he said the words, Nick knew he was being unrealistic optimistic. "I just thought you should know," he finished lamely, "in case she shows up here again."

"Why Nicolas, you've managed to put your finger directly on it. She does indeed 'catch killers' as you so aptly put it, and our hands are so very bloody. What makes you think that she will ignore the evidence of her senses? Even if she is not certain of what she has seen, do you truly think that she will simply 'let it go'? If she is half of what you suspect, you know she will not." LaCroix smiled narrowly as Nick looked away.

"Perhaps I should rephrase my first question to you. What do you want -me-to do about it?"

"Nothing." Nick turned quickly back to face his old master. "I'll handle it."

"As you have before, no doubt. The Enforcers don't appear to share your high opinion of your abilities in this matter. Or have you forgotten, Doctor?"

"No. I haven't forgotten." Nick clenched one fist in remembered guilt. More than two hundred years ago another mortal had found evidence of their existence, and the Enforcers had efficiently put down that evidence. And the mortal who possessed it. More recently they had reappeared in his life, and he had narrowly prevented another such senseless death. "Are they here? So soon?"

"I have not seen them. But of course, one rarely does. Even if they are not, Nicolas, they undoubtedly will be soon. And if they are forced to take care of -your responsibility-" he emphasized clearly, "they will doubtless not be amused. I may have been able to intercede for you once, but I doubt I would have such luck again.

"For your own sake, I suggest you clean this up quickly. If they have seen this morning's papers, they almost certainly will be here soon. Now, if you will excuse me, my public awaits," LaCroix rose gracefully, and gestured with one gloved hand toward the door of the studio.

Nick nodded soberly.

"I'll take care of it."

#####

"Blood Stalker Strikes Again!"

The headline screamed up of the page loudly enough to give Agent Samantha Keller, RCMP Violent Crimes, a headache. Frowning, she rubbed her temples slowly, eyes tightly closed. The all-night diner's lights were offensively bright, and buzzed like an angry nest of hornets. Still, it was a momentary break from the frustration that had been building since she'd first been assigned this case. The usual hunches which filled in the blanks left by standard police investigative techniques were almost completely absent from this case. This killer spoke to her only in half-heard mutterings and mocking laughter which lead her only to where he had already been.

Except of course in her dreams. Dreams which left her trembling and drenched in sweat, remembering nothing but the swish of a descending knife. It had become simpler, of late, not to sleep at all. Eyes still closed, she took a last sip of the coffee, silently thanking God (or whoever was listening) for the miracle of caffeine.

"That gonna do it for you, hon?" The smell of Juicy Fruit gum and the whisper of a ticket hitting the table announced the presence of the waitress before the woman had even opened her mouth. Sam opened her eyes reluctantly. The ticket had come to rest neatly in the middle of the condensation her water glass had left, and all that was visible of her server was her ample backside.

"No, thank you. It was lovely, really." She looked down at her plate of congealing scrambled eggs and half-cooked hashbrowns. Yum. At least the coffee was decent. Dropping a five on the table, Samantha headed toward the waiting dark.

It was nearly two o'clock by the time she reached The Raven. Yellow police tape still criss-crossed the heavy wooden door, with more of it littering the sidewalk to either side. The doorknob didn't respond to a polite tug, nor did the door respond to the not-so-polite pounding she gave it.

"How rude."

It wouldn't be that difficult to call the station and get someone to contact the owner. Who would doubtless be less than pleased to open the door for her at 2 a.m. Why bother him? She'd catch up with him sooner or later. Right now the scene of the last crime beckoned. By tomorrow the final forensics inspection would be over, the nightclub cleaned up. It would be as if the torture and murder of Danielle Correlli had never happened.

"Not this time." Glancing casually down both sides of the street (it would be extremely embarrassing to be offered a ride downtown by Toronto's Finest), Keller slipped a flat black case from the rear pocket of her jeans and knelt in front of the front door.

"Bingo." The door opened inward slightly into the coal black interior. "One minute, ten seconds." She slid her set of lockpicks back into her pocket, then carefully stepped inside. The light switch to the left of the door brought dim light to portions of the dance floor and walk ways. Stuffing her gloves in one pocket of her oversized jacket, Keller pulled out a small tape recorder and clicked it on.

"Method of entry was a small skylight on the northwest corner of the building. Skylight is not visible from the street, suggesting that he had been inside the building at least one time previously. "It would have been dark inside when he arrived, with only the skylight itself for illumination. Victim's prints on one table suggest that he set her down in order to clear off the bar area. No evidence of binding with artificial materials has been found. She sat there and waited for him to come back..."

Keller's monologue continued as she approached the scene of the murder itself. Lost in her report, and in the whispers that filled her head with each step, she didn't see the door which opened slowly out into the bar. A figure in black stepped silently out into the darkness...

"No excessive blood spray was found. Tissue and fecal matter were not spread throughout the room as has become customary, and, in the absence of religious items, no sacrilegious displays have been found. <Alter such a holy place? These will understand this offering, this gift on the altar of wood and blood.>," Keller continued, oblivious to the way her voice deepened, roughened.

"Holy place? Where the hell did that come from?" Clicking off her recorder in disgust, he irritably began to stuff it back into her pocket. This place was getting to her. It happened, sometimes. Like in that...

"Some people take their amusements very seriously," a spectral voice intoned.

"Thanks, Nick. I'll see you tomorrow night."

Tracy Vetter waved at her partner as he pulled his non-regulation Cadillac away from the curb and back into traffic. (Ow.) The tenseness of the evening had left her with stiff muscles and frazzled nerves, which complained heavily now that the excitement was over. She rubbed absently at one shoulder as she continued towards her apartment.

"Excitement? That's a laugh. Just another fabulous night on the job with Tracy Vetter, girl detective," she muttered, heading up the lobby doors on autopilot. Nick hadn't said anything, of course, but she knew that he was coming around to the Keller woman's side on the whole stakeout idea. That woman...

"Hmmpf," she added to herself, digging for her apartment keys. "Walking in like she owns the place. I may have to take that crap from the other shields, but no way is some, some, outside help going to tell me how to do my job. Ah! Here we go." Catching the keys, where they had been hiding at the bottom of her purse she unlocked the lobby door. The lock had stiffened with the recent freeze, and she had to shove slightly to get the stubborn door open.

(Movement)

Out of the corner of her eye, as she shoved against the door, Tracy caught a glimpse of something. Someone? Sticking one foot on the door to hold it open, she turned and leaned back out into the cold.

"Hello? Is anyone there?"

Nothing. At three in the morning not too much was stirring in her upper-middle class area. Not even the barking of a dog stirred the still night air. She sighed and shook her head.

"That's it. No more midnight horror films for you, kiddo." Yawning, Tracy pulled the door shut behind herself and headed toward the waiting elevators.

Outside, something separated itself from the shadows and moved with chilling ease up the fire escape at the side of the building.

"Hi, honey, I'm home!" Tracy sang out cheerfully.

"Oh. I forgot. I'm not married." Definitely too much tv. Tracy shrugged off her coat, and dropped it over the coat rack by the door. Hitting the light switch by the door brought the lights on, with the lights followed immediately by warm air as she turned on the heater. She headed immediately for the bedroom, where she quickly stripped out of the layers of her "shy little victim" clothes. Looking suspiciously at her blouse, which she hadn't worn since college, Tracy took an experimental sniff.

"Ugh." Time for the laundry basket, you. And you, too, Trace," she said firmly to her reflection. The bedroom mirror offered no reply.

"I'll take that as a yes."

Ten minutes later Tracy was in heaven.

"Ohhh. I really should do this more often," she sighed, sinking deeper into the hot bubblebath until only her head and shoulders remained above water. Taking an oversized wash cloth, she began methodically rubbing her tired skin clean of dirt and stress. A bubblebath was -so- relaxing...she really had to make time for this more often. Why, she could almost go to sleep right here. Almost...

"Wha? Huh? I'm up, I'm up." Tracy brushed something cool and damp away from her face and sat up with a start. "What did I...oh, rats."

The police siren that had awakened her was fading slowly as it passed her apartment building. The bath water had cooled to being just slightly too cold to delay any longer, and she clambered out quickly. The heater had apparently shut itself off, because the bathroom was now very chilly to her wet body. Toweling off quickly, Tracy put on the pajamas she'd thought to lay out beforehand and headed sleepily towards her bedroom.

Opening the bathroom door brought her wide awake as a blast of frigid air slapped at her face. The lights were out in the livingroom. (Did I do that? Can't remember.) She started to walk into the room, then froze.

(Wait. Let your eyes do the moving. Don't be a target.) With relief, Tracy felt her academy training coming back to her. (Movement. Look for movement.) Flattening herself against the door frame, she scanned the room cautiously. Light from the street lamps outside caught the slow movement of her living room curtains as they fluttered in the cool air. The window behind them was ajar.

"Vachon?" Pulling something like this would probably be his idea of a joke. He's probably hiding behind the couch with a corny black cape on. Probably lives for times like this.

Right. Vachon might be many things, but he wasn't the type to pull a cruel stunt like this. Now can that, Vetter, and think. Where's your gun? Purse. Bedroom.

The stillness of the room did nothing to relieve her nerves. Putting her back to the wall, Tracy edged down the hall toward her bedroom. The lights weren't on there, either. The purse was where she'd left it, on the middle of her bed. Did she leave it unzipped? It was now. Take a deep breath. Walk across the room.

Move!

"Traaaacy." This sibilant whisper stopped her in her tracks. Where was it coming from? Never mind. Get your weapon. She had reached the bed and grabbed her purse when the voice came at her again.

"Traaaacy. So soft, so pure. You wanted me to come to you, Tracy. Now here I am. Aren't you glaaad?" The voice seemed to come at her from all directions, mocking her. How did he know her name? (Oh God.)

Two important realizations hit Tracy at the same moment that her closet door slammed open.

This wasn't a burglar.

And her gun was no longer in her purse.

#####

"You really shouldn't sneak up on a police officer," Samantha managed in a voice which was - almost- entirely calm. Quietly she reholstered her pistol and took a deep breath before meeting the stranger's eyes.

She knew who he was, of course. The mysterious owner of The Raven, who also happened to be late-night radio's Night Crawler. He managed to look calm, damn him, as if people drew deadly weapons on him every day. Hell, with his reputation, maybe they *did*. It didn't explain how he'd managed to get the drop on her. Nobody did that.

He was looking at her with a mixture of amusement and irritation.

"I trust that you have an explanation for this late night intrusion, Detective...?"

"Agent Keller, RCMP." She flashed him her badge.

He shrugged as if the distinction was unimportant.

"That still doesn't answer my question. It was my understanding that you people were finished here. At least, your Commissioner assured me that this was so." Of course he was baiting her, but there was something else there. Tension? Interesting.

"This part of our investigation will be closed when I say it's closed, not before. If you have any problems with that, here's the number of the RCMP headquarters in Montreal." She handed him a business card with a hand which shook not at all, and which he took with elaborate politeness.

Underneath their ritual an undercurrent of tension had developed which could be cut with a knife.

"I'm sorry if I disturbed you, Mr. LaCroix. It was my understanding that you didn't use the living quarters here. Were you expecting company here tonight?" His wintry smile as she slipped into Interrogation Mode didn't do anything to improve Keller's disposition.

"Not at all. But, murder investigation or not, I still must work." He gestured with one black-gloved hand toward a dark corner, where she now remembered that a recording studio lay. "Now, is there some way that I can help you?"

####

Nick Knight sighed in frustration.

Since The Raven was temporarily closed, he'd been forced to rely on other methods of getting information on the vampire community. Perhaps because they are all forced to keep silent among the majority of the population, vampires are notorious gossips when with their own kind. Comings and goings are always noted, commented upon, and occasionally acted upon, even in a city the size of Toronto. If a renegade had come to town, someone would have heard by now.

No one had heard a thing.

Of course, the body found at The Raven was public knowledge, and fodder for many a long night's discussion. Common wisdom suggested that, if the killer was one of them, that he or she was clearly insane. No one would have the effrontery to commit something so public. Especially not in LaCroix's territory. If he didn't correct the problem, common opinion continued, the Enforcers certainly would. And if it wasn't a vampire, then it was of no concern to them. Either way, no real problem.

All of this meant that Nick had wasted the last few hours of darkness the night had to offer. Screed had generously offered to scour the city (for a price, of course), but with the general description that they had, Screed'd have half of the men in the city brought to Nick within a single night's time. Each for the set bounty, of course. Vachon had been carefully uninterested when Nick mentioned that Tracy was involved in the investigation, and had nothing of value to offer. Disgusted, he returned to his car and signed himself off duty. Maybe a good day's sleep would make things clearer.

Headed back toward his apartment, Nick reflected on his other pressing problem. LaCroix, damn him, had been right. If Samantha Keller knew what he was, she could prove to be very dangerous to the entire community. More than once during her briefing earlier this evening, he'd caught the flat, greedy look of a professional hunter in her eyes. A hunter who hunted for the joy of it, not the necessity. She was clearly tenacious, and unlikely to be squeamish in doing whatever needed to be done to get her man. Even if that meant accepting the reality of vampires.

Still, tonight she'd been much calmer, even friendly in a detached, professional way. Maybe he'd imagined the connection, the sharp feeling of being invaded, seen for what he truly was. Perhaps she would, as he'd suggested to LaCroix, simply pack up and go home when this case was done.

And "perhaps" pigs would fly.

The police scanner suddenly came to life, muffled by the classical music pouring from the caddie's speakers. Out of force of habit, Nick turned down the music and brought the scanner's volume up.

<Disturbance reported at 1025 N Blackwood, corner of 17th and Wilbur. Possible domestic disturbance, units are advised to proceed with caution.>

Ten-twenty five Blackwood?

"Tracy." Flicking on the car's police lights and siren, Nick pulled the Cadillac into a sharp U-turn. "Eighty-One Kilo responding."

###

The interview had gone downhill from there.

Samantha Keller walked down the alley behind The Raven, hands clenched in frustration. It was a new feeling. Normally her instincts whispered things to her about her subject that a straight dialogue wouldn't reveal. Things like motivations, hidden personality quirks. Guilt. Now those instincts had cut out twice.

"Great. First with killer, now this guy. Why couldn't I have been a teacher, like mama wanted? I doubt many of them spend a lot of time hanging out in such glamorous places." She kicked disgustedly at the dirty snow. "I'm missing something big. I know I am. Something huge." She rubbed absently at her forehead above her left eye, which had started to throb. First Knight, who wasn't - human -, somehow, and now LaCroix. He had been very careful to keep her from touching him "accidentally", but the feelings that she had managed to get from him were even weirder than what she'd picked up from Knight. They'd fenced around each other for most of an hour before calling it a draw, and she'd left with little more than she'd gone in with. Damn the man! He was so smug, so...infuriatingly self-confident. If it wasn't for the initial tension she'd picked up from him, she wouldn't have even tried to pursue her line of questioning.

Not that it had done much good anyway. She leaned back against the back wall of the Raven and closed her eyes, trying to wish away this damn headache. Instead something clicked inside.

<Soft, deep laughter. Pleasure and satisfaction at a job well done, at the rewards which would come. Boots dropping into the snow. The sound of heavy boxes being shifted. The slide of metal on metal, the smell of fetid air. A man's form in darkness, lights from above. He stopped. Started to turn. In another moment, his face would be visible in the flickering light. He continued to turn. There was the edge of a smile...>

PAIN! Bright, agonizing pain that shattered her left eye and sent lancing pain deep into her head. Samantha staggered forward with the force of it. Control, control... Deep breaths. Where is he?

<A livingroom. Warm, dimly lit. A blond woman on the floor, blood pooling beneath her. The crash of splintering wood. A demon with the form of a man...>

"Tracy."

###

Tracy lay among the shards of glass from her bedroom mirror, watching numbly as the beast approached her. From far away she could hear the sounds of someone breathing unsteadily, making mewling sounds of pain with each intake of air. The sounds were unimportant.

What was important was the man beast in front of her, above her, looming like a dark angel. He smiled a terrible smile, full of wisdom and compassion as he stretched out a hand toward her. In his hand was a gleaming knife, its tip covered in blood.

"Now, now, my dearest child. There is no need to struggle. All will become clear to you. My instruction is a hard one, but in the end you will see His face, and understand all. Come. Let us begin." He knelt before her, resting his blade against her collar bone. His free hand gently stroked her hair, then caught it brutally at the base of her neck. Slowly he began to trace the fine line of her collarbone, leaving a deep trail of blood behind.

The pain was sharp, bright. It screamed loudly in her head, blocking out the madman's hypnotic words. With a convulsive shudder, Tracy through off the lethargic stupor that had been encompassing her.

(He was trying to hypnotize me!) Tracy thought in amazement. She glanced carefully up at his face, but the killer seemed unaware of his loss of control, instead humming softly as he completed the line he had begun. The pain was bad, but not being able to resist had been far worse. One of her hands seemed to have been pinned behind her when she fell, but she stretched out her other, hoping to find a weapon, any weapon.

"Much better. Let's get more comfortable, shall we?" He lifted her effortlessly into the air, and deposited her roughly onto the bed. Tracy landed with a thump, her head lolling limply to one side, her eyes closed.

"Not so soon, my dear. I have so much to show you." The man who called himself Azoth set a small, delicate blade down beside the bed, along with a large lidded jar. Tenderly he brushed the hair from her face, then bent over her as if to tenderly kiss her goodnight.

"NO!" Tracy's eyes flew open as her hand slashed upward. Her hand, with its long, sharp hard of mirrored glass, impacted solidly with the killer's face, the tip of the blade sliding into his left eye with sickening ease. He jerked back out of her grasp, his one eye widening with almost comical surprise while one hand reached up toward the horror of his face.

He knelt above her on the bed, and Tracy managed to get one knee firmly into his groin as she twisted out from under him and off of the bed. She had a moment to reflect that he was human enough for *that* to affect him before she ran for the bedroom door.

(Go for the phone? Call for help? No time. Get outside. Get--) The world spun alarmingly around Tracy, and she stumbled to the livingroom floor with a thump. Behind her, she could hear footsteps staggering down the hall. She struggled for her feet, then gave up and began to crawl hopelessly toward the front door.

(What did he do to me? Can't move, can't breathe. Wha...) The world began to tilt, and black flowers appeared to block her vision as the world grew grayer and grayer. Through the roaring in her ears she could hear the killer behind her.

"You -dare- to hurt me? I will make you beg for death. Your suffering will be less--"

A loud sound in front of her blocked out his words, and suddenly Nick was there, looking so...strange. He was standing where her front door had been, and the light from the street lamps had caught his eyes, making them shine brightly in the dark. (Like cat's eyes, or like...) The answer suddenly seemed unimportant as her head became too heavy to hold up any longer. (...like...)

"Vachon?"

Tracy's whisper seemed loud to Nick's heightened senses. Her breathing was shallow, the bloodsmell powerful in the room. A trail of her blood lead back into the back of the apartment, back to a tall figure with gore streaming down one side of his face. Shoving the splintered door away, Nick launched himself at the man.

And missed.

The surprise was worse than the momentary pain of impact. How...? The man was mortal, he had no doubt of that. No human could have moved that fast. He spun around to see the man kneeling behind Tracy, holding her limp body in his arms.

"Perhaps I have overstepped myself, good sir. Is she your pet? Fair of hair and skin, young and comely," he continued, tenderly stroking her pale skin. "We are much alike, you and I. Both preying on these weak bags of flesh. But while you feed your own beast, I feed our Dark Lord." He looked down at

Tracy, then shrugged his disappointment. Through the open window, they could both hear the scream of approaching sirens.

"Alas, she is no longer of any use to me. A pity. She and I had not yet begun to play." Standing quickly, he let Tracy's limp body fall to the floor as he began to back slowly toward the open door. Nick took a step toward him.

"Ah, ah! While I would greatly enjoy a dance, I think you, sir, have more pressing concerns. Or don't you hear what you are not hearing?" The man took another step toward the door, smiling slightly.

Hear? The only sounds that Nick could pick up were the sounds of the patrol cars pulling up in front of the building, the patrolmen's voices raised in excitement. Under that was the slow beat of the killer's heart, his unhurried breath. There were voices coming from the neighboring apartments, but nothing which should concern them. So, what...?

Heartbeats. In this room there should be two mortal beats.
There was only one.

(One and two and three and four and five. Breathe! Breathe! One and two and three and four and five. Breathe! Breathe!)

The City of Toronto Police Department required that all of its officers be proficient in first aid procedures, something that Janette had found more than mildly amusing.

"Really, Nicola. Protect these mortals if you must, but why go to such efforts to save those already dying. What are you saving them for? Another three years? Another twenty? In no time at all they will be dust no matter what you do." She had flicked lightly at the book he had been attempting to study. "You will do nothing more than stain your clothing over mortals who probably deserve exactly what they get."

"No, I can't believe that. All human life is precious, Janette. Why can't you understand that?" It was an old argument between them, off and on for the last hundred years or more. Janette had just shook her head sadly at poor, deluded Nicola, and drained her wine glass. After a moment the conversation turned to neutral subjects and the subject was dropped. Nick's study, however, was not.

Thank God.

(One and two and three and four and five. Breathe! Breathe!)

Nick continued CPR on Tracy's still form as the rescue personnel arrived. Within seconds the men were set up, and quickly relieved him. Nick stood up and backed away and stood watching uncertainly.

"Is she...?" he began uncertainly. One of the men looked up and shook his head.

"Don't know yet. We're taking her to St. Thomas'. The doctors will be able to give you more." He then turned back to his partner as a piece of their equipment began to emit a high-pitched tone.

"Ready? Clear!"

As Tracy's small body arched lifelessly into the air, Nick knew he had to do something. Anything. Schanke's dead was still fresh in his mind, the pain of the senseless murder, the crazed killer.

It wouldn't happen again. In seconds Nick was out the door, barely keeping his feet to the floor as he hurried toward the stairwell. The killer had been injured, and couldn't have gotten far. Bleeding as heavily as he was, there was a good chance that Nick would be able to pick up the still-fresh bloodsmell.

A smear on the fire door of the stairs has a fresh smear of blood. Nick launched himself down the cement stairs, not bothering with the mundanity of steps. The stairs ended in the underground parking area. At the stairway exit Nick stopped to listen and smell.

(A quick, wheezing intake of breath. The smell of mortal sweat. And blood.)

Heedless of appearances, Nick moved with vampire speed toward the scent of fresh blood. The man might have been lucky before, but now Nick was ready for him. He was meat.

A tall figure leaned awkwardly against the wall of the nightwatchman's office, the smell of blood very strong. With a blur of speed Nick reached him, spun him around into the air.

"May I have this dance?" Nick grinned through vampire teeth. The man's head snapped back, revealing a stranger's face, the throat slit from ear to ear. Hot with fury, Nick tossed the body aside and turned toward a sound behind him.

Facing him was a smiling ghoul. Gore streaked down from one empty eye socket, splattering the white shirt and black trenchcoat beneath. The remaining eye gleamed madly above a rictus grin of pain and hate.

Simply killing this madman would not be enough. First he must be made to know a part of the pain he had inflicted upon others. Nick drew the man's eyes toward his own, and launched himself brutally into the man's mind.

A cold, black iciness enveloped his soul. A force so powerful that to call it merely evil would be to minimize the horror it brought with it flooded into him. A thick, slow chuckle echoed through his head, a voice that sounded vaguely familiar. As something reached for him out of the darkness, Nick pulled himself free.

The man was still in his grasp, smiling slightly.

"What manner of man..." Nick couldn't find the words. Never had he felt this kind of horror. Not in nearly eight hundred years. The man's smile widened as if in sympathy. And he brought a chunk of wood from Tracy's door down into Nick's chest. The power of the blow knocked Nick back into the wall of the small office, pinning him there like a bug. The man's smile never faltered.

"I was wrong about you. You are weak, just like those pathetic mortals. So many things will kill you. You flee from your Dark Lord, and it makes you weak. We will not meet again, coward." With that pronouncement he turned and fled up the driveway and into the breaking dawn.

Nick pulled weakly at the makeshift stake. It had gone completely through his chest and into the wall behind him, the wood biting deeply into his flesh. Blood coated the exposed length of wood, making it hard to grasp. A wracking cough shook him, splattering clots of blood in a wide half circle in front of him. He pulled again at the stake, weaker this time. The garage had become painfully bright, with shining prisms reflecting off the hoods of the nearby cars. Blood welled up in his throat, and he tried to cough again. Nothing emerged but a strangled gasp, and the colored prisms started to spin as the first light of dawn began to fill the garage...

###

LaCroix watched the first tinges of pink creep across the night skyline, lost in thought. Idly, he dipped one long finger in the blood he held and traced in around the rim of the fine Waterford crystal which held it. The clear tone blended nicely with the final strains of A Little Night Music, playing from hidden speakers behind him. As the silence grew the first fingers of the angry sun crept above the horizon and he reluctantly pressed the button which would close his windows against the coming day. He should be preparing for his rest, but something tugged at the ancient vampire. Something strong enough to keep him from his sleep even here, in his most secure of places.

It most assuredly wasn't the mortal woman that Nicolas was so concerned with. She had been interesting, even fascinating in her own limited fashion, but she was nothing that Nicolas could not deal on his own. Her cool, cynical composure would keep him from becoming emotionally attached, that much was certain: Nicolas had always preferred his ladies frail and delicate, almost angelic in word and deed. For a time LaCroix had entertained the thought that perhaps this was changing, but Nicolas had made it clear that his interest in the Lambert woman was purely one of _self_-interest. At the time LaCroix had been curiously disappointed in Nicolas' pragmatism in this manner; Natalie was an extraordinary woman, and would have made a beautiful, resourceful vampire. No matter. Nicolas would not be ruled by foolish mortal emotions in this.

Still, something about the Keller woman kept drawing him back to their meeting an hour before. Tall, with deep green eyes and dark hair cut short in the current fashion, she possessed a magnetism he did not often see among mortals. Perhaps it was her hunter's mind, which apparently questioned everything and took nothing at face value. More likely it was the small gift that she possessed for seeing beyond the physical plane. While no match for any vampire, she did possess certain mental gifts which no doubt made her a formidable enemy.

To mortals.

LaCroix shook his head, and refilled his wine glass one last time. It really was getting late. If this kept up, soon he would be emulating Nicolas and his foolish attempts at mortal behavior, staying up half the day to work on one idiotic mortal activity or another. LaCroix drained the glass quickly, savoring the warm, salty nectar as it slid down his throat. Why Nicolas would wish to give this up, this delicious combination of power, knowledge and sensuality was beyond his understanding.

Nicolas.

That was what kept him from his rest.

"Nicolas. What have you gotten yourself into, hmm?"

###

"Nick?" Samantha tapped the blond man on the shoulder. Startled, the man turned his head around with a jerk, dropping the small plastic bag he'd been holding. He was much thinner, with a sickly-looking mustache dying on his face and an ME ID on his shirt.

"Huh?" Something must have shown on her face, because he drew back in alarm. "N-n-n-no. My name's Ralph. Can I, um, help you?"

"I'm looking for Detective Knight. About so high, blond? Wearing a long black coat?" Sam let out a short, exasperated breath as the man looked at her blankly.

"Ambulance guys said somebody was here before we arrived. Sounds like it might have been Knight." One of the patrolmen spoke up, looking at her uncertainly. "And you are...?"

"Keller. RCMP. Did they say where he went?"

"Guy took off like a shot. Ambulance driver thinks he went left."

Sam nodded impatiently, not sure where this need to hurry, to act, was coming from. "How about Vetter? Any word?" she asked, already moving toward the door.

"Doesn't look good. Doc said he'd call the station as soon as they had anything." The patrolman said, his voice a mixture of concern and anger. One of their own had gone down. Even with only a year on the force, he shared every cop's unspoken request: Please, let me be the one to catch this bastard. Let me take him down. (Let me take him _out_).

As he finished Sam hit the hallway. The stairs were straight ahead, a small bloodstain near the door handle, and she shoved the door open, careful not to hit the blood with her gloved hand. (Don't mess up the evidence. We've never gotten a print on this guy. We're so close now. Don't screw it up. But hurry, hurry).

At the bottom of the stairs she paused long enough to draw her gun, then carefully opened the last fire door. The quiet told her that the uniforms hadn't been down here yet--they must have beaten her here by seconds. Good. Too many voices, too many men with minds jacked up over the "officer down" call would distract her. Looking in both directions, she carefully edged out, her back flat against the wall of the stairwell. From outside she could hear the police radios and voices raised in excitement or curiosity. From inside, only the soft hum of electric lights overhead.

Wait. There was something else. Something...dripping. Using the parked cars for cover, she moved cautiously in the direction of the faint sounds. (Bad guy still here? Don't think so. Doesn't feel right. But something's wrong. Watch yourself, kiddo).

The underground parking garage seemed a lot larger than it should have been. Every sound was magnified, distorted. Common sense declared that she should go upstairs, get warm bodies to help in the search. But another, deeper, sense whispered otherwise, and that was the voice that Samantha had always followed. After what seemed to be an eternity, she approached the far wall of the garage. Two bodies were there, one sprawled on the cement floor in a puddle of blood, the other leaning awkwardly against the wall nearby. No bad guy in sight. Lowering her weapon slightly, Sam hurried forward.

(Wait)

Slowing as she approached, Samantha tried to see what was wrong. The standing figure was in shadow, but she could see from the posture that whoever it was either unconscious or dead. Whoever had done this had clearly left. So what...?

(Smoke. The body's smoking.)

What she had first taken to be steam rising off a warm body in the early morning air was in fact white smoke, curling up in lazy circles from the body leaning against the wall. Now that she was closer, Sam could also see that the body was pinned to the wall, its head slumped forward onto a blood-soaked chest. Her gun up, she moved slowly forward.

Incredibly, as she stopped in front of the body it twitched slightly, and a thick, low moan rose from the flailed chest.

"Easy, buddy. The ambulance is on its way. Just take it easy." With that she reached forward with her free hand and lifted the chin. Who was the poor bas-

"Hell-fahr." The sound of a long-ago childhood in New Orleans escaped as she stepped awkwardly backward, gun trembling in front of her. "Nick? Is that you?"

Nick Knight responded painfully to the presence in front of him. Someone was there, standing in the fire of sunlight that surrounded him, smothered him. Please, let them understand, let them "help...help me" the blood-soaked apparition in front of her whispered weakly. Nick's voice, his presence, coming from this...thing.

This vampire.

"Well, doesn't that just explain a lot." Reluctantly, Samantha lowered her weapon. Her first startling impression of Nick flooded back from the night they first met. The feeling of an ancient spirit, a powerful amorality kept at bay by the strength of will alone. She had checked him out, already knowing that he wasn't the killer she sought. But he clearly was a killer. Could she help him? -Should- she?

He had come here after Tracy's attacker. He was a cop.

He's a -vampire-, for God's sake!

She watched as he pulled weakly at the improvised stake that held him to the wall. Smoke slowly drifted from his exposed skin. Exhausted, he slumped forward, his face a mask of agony.

"Oh, what the hell. Not like I expected to die in bed, or anything. C'mon, Nick. Nick? Can you hear me?" She shook his shoulder gently, mindful of the deep wounds just below. Slowly, he lifted his head, blinked at her unseeingly.

"Nick, I'm gonna help you now, okay? Probably gonna hurt like hell, but then it'll get better. Okay?" She looked at him doubtfully. He seemed to have lapsed back into unconsciousness. Putting one of his arms over her shoulder, Samantha leaned forward and put on leg on the wall next to him. Shoving hard, she pulled him and the stake free of the wall, the force of it staggering both of them backward. Careful to avoid impaling him any deeper, she dragged Nick's apparently unconscious body deeper into the garage, away from the dawn's first light.

"Great. Now what? I'm assuming that a hospital is out of the question," she added to his still form. She sat on her haunches next to him, biting her lip. It was only luck that had kept the patrolmen out of the garage so far. Sooner or later they'd come down, and even old Uncle Remy, that master of the tall tale, wouldn't be able to get them out of -that-.

"Okay. You sit tight, Nick. I'll be right back."

###

Natalie Lambert paced back and forth in her small office, her lab coat flapping about her knees. "What do you mean, you can't find him? His partner's just been attacked. Of course I tried him at home! Yes, I'll try again." Untangling herself from the phone's long cord, Natalie slammed down the receiver with a frustrated <bang!>. Captain Reese had passed on the news of Tracy's attack, knowing that she and Nick were friends. The attack had been a terrible shock, but not nearly as bad as when he had not-quite-casually asked her if she'd heard from Nick in the past hour. It was now fully day, and while Nick's car had been found at the scene of Tracy's attack, he himself was nowhere to be found. When he didn't answer the phone at home, Natalie began frantically calling every place that he might have gone to "hole up" against the oncoming day.

Nothing. No Nick, no message, no badly burned body with police identification. "Damn it! Why does he always do this?" Natalie slammed one fist against her leg, her face crumpling in fear and frustration. (Why does he always do this to -me-?) Natalie told herself that Nick would show up like he always did, no worse for wear, a perplexed smile on his face when he saw her worried expression. After all, he'd been taking care of himself for nearly eight hundred years without her. He was probably just fine.

"Damn it," she said quietly, her arms hugging her shoulders tightly. "Nick, where are you?" She allowed herself one moment of self-indulgent pain and worry, then got back to work. Where would Nick have gone, if he was caught out?

"His car. Of course," she said, smiling slightly in relief. "Martin? Can you cover for me?" The day before, a portly, graying gentleman with a penchant for terrible cigars, stuck his head into her office.

"Certainly, my dear." He topped an imaginary hat in her direction, then stopped as he saw the expression on her face. "Anything amiss?"

Natalie forced her face into a casual smile.

"No, just remembered something that I needed to get done. You're sure you don't mind?"

"Not at all. Just don't forget you owe me one when Julia comes by." Julia was his granddaughter, legendary in the department for her ability to sell Girl Guide cookies.

"I'll buy a case. Thanks, Martin." Already shucking off her lab coat, Natalie grabbed her keys and headed for the door.

###

"Nick? Can you hear me?"

Samantha waved her hand over Nick's open eyes, but received no response. Nick remained unmoving (and apparently unbreathing), as he had since she'd manhandled him out of her car and into her hotel room an hour ago. Presumably his house or apartment would be better suited for him, but Nick had been in no condition to offer directions, and her knowledge of downtown Toronto was spotty at best.

"Ah, -I-," she corrected, "have a vampire in my hotel room. A vampire," she repeated. "I've seen some very strange things in my time, Nick, but I don't mind telling you that this beats all. I wish to hell you'd wake up and tell me what to do."

For it was obvious that something was very wrong. He'd stopped smoking (burning, her mind firmly corrected) as soon as she had him out of the direct sunlight, but the terrible wound in his chest continued to bleed. She'd been hopeful when the wound around the main point of entry had begun to close as soon as she removed the stake, but it never closed completely, and other, smaller wounds continued to bleed. Samantha wasn't sure, but she thought these areas might be where splinters were still embedded so deeply that she couldn't see them. In addition, his face had taken a gray, emaciated look that she didn't like. His fangs were still very noticeable, as were his strange eyes. Nick clearly needed help.

For want of anything else to do, she checked the makeshift bandages she'd made from the bed's sheets and assorted hotel towels. The bleeding had slowed but the wounds hadn't closed any further. Soon she'd need more towels. It was a good thing that the hotel put plastic slipcovers on their mattresses. Reaching up to thoughtfully scratch her nose, Samantha saw that they were covered with blood. Wrinkling her nose, she pushed up off the bed and headed toward the bathroom.

The bright red fluid turned pink as it swirled down the drain. Reaching for a clean towel, Samantha caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror over the sink. She looked more than a little like a staking victim herself, her blouse and jacket coated with rust-colored stains which were slowly drying.

"Guess this jacket's a wash. Wonder if I can put it on my expense rep--" she stopped in midsentence. (Oh, you dummy. Bloodstains. Blood.)

Nick was a vampire. Even if all of the legends weren't true, one almost certainly was: he drank blood. Those long fangs couldn't be for anything else. And, judging from the sheets and from what she was currently wearing, he'd lost a lot of it.

(Great. I doubt sincerely that the blood bank does take-out.)

She forced herself to finish cleaning up as best she could to give herself time to think. Even if she could make a hospital understand what he needed, Nick would end up in a scientific side show somewhere. (No way. No how.)

That left meat markets, few of which were likely to be open at this hour. Still, that might be her best bet. There was a phone book by the bed. Drying her face, Samantha returned to the main room. Pulling out the phone book, she glanced idly at Nick as she thumbed through it. He looked worse, if that was possible, and when she touched him his skin was ice-cold.

"Damn." The hesitated a moment longer, then reached to pull a switchblade out of her right boot. A long, sharp blade popped out when she pushed the recessed button, and she lay it's sharp edge along the inside of her left hand, pulling back quickly to leave a long, deep cut across the palm. She hissed involuntarily as the initial sting became pain, put held the hand steady as blood began to well up in the cupped palm. Was it her imagination, or did Nick stir ever so slightly? Setting the switchblade on the dresser where she could reach it easily, Samantha lowered her hand slowly toward Nick's mouth.

(Please, God, let me be doing the right thing.)

The moment the first drops of blood hit his lips Nick blinked, and raised a weak hand to hers as it met his lips. She was surprised to feel no pain, just a curious draining sensation as though more than just a few cups of blood were being taken from her. After what seemed to be just a few seconds, Nick's eyes blinked again, and some sort of comprehension filled his face. Weakly he pushed at her hand while he turned his head away from her.

"No. You don't understand..." His voice was weak, but clear.

"I understand, all right. C'mon, Nick, It's all right."

"No." His voice seemed weaker. "You don't understand. I could kill you." He appeared to be about to add something, then stopped.

"Nick?" At his lack of response, she continued uncertainly. "Let me help you. Come on. Talk to me." Her hand was still bleeding freely, and she absently wrapped it in her handkerchief. "There must be something I can do. C'mon, Nick, don't give up on me now."

He whispered something softly. She leaned over him, her ear near his blood-stained lips. "Who?"

"Nat." he managed weakly.

###

Nick's Cadillac was where the captain had said it was, parked at a crazy angle outside of Tracy's apartment building. Parking control had ordered it towed, and Nat had to chase off the tow-truck driver, who gave her a look that suggested that maybe -she- needed hospitalization. Nat waited impatiently until he'd driven off, then lightly tapped the Caddie's trunk lid.

"Nick?" She felt like an idiot talking to a car, but it would be worth it if he would only answer. "Nick? Are you in there?" There was no reply, and the lid had a hollow sound when she hit it that suggested that it was empty. Discouraged, she turned and sat on the trunk lid, trying to think of where to look next. The idea that maybe Tracy's attacker had managed to capture (or kill) Nick kept coming back to her, no matter how hard she tried to banish it. Keeping moving seemed to be the only thing that did the trick. Moving around to the front of the car, Natalie reached in and felt around under the seat. Sure enough, the extra set of keys that Nick had were still there. She'd just take the Caddie back to Nick's place, where he could pick it up when he came home.

(If he comes home) her mind whispered. (What if he doesn't, Natalie? What will you do then?) Natalie was saved from having to answer by the sudden beeping of her pager. The number wasn't one she recognized.

"Come on, come on. Ring, darn it." Sam paced the narrow confines of her hotel room, willing the telephone to ring. It had taken her several minutes to track down Natalie Lambert, or at least her pager number. Nick had been able to add nothing more to his cryptic comment about "Nat" or "a nat", and she was rapidly running out of choices.

Natalie Lambert had talked with Knight extensively on the night of the murder at The Raven, and from their body language Sam made the assumption that they were more than just co-workers. The woman was also a physician, and could very well go by the nickname of Nat. It was slim, but it was all she had.

And now that she'd placed the call, Samantha was afraid to leave, afraid to tie up the phone lines looking for a meat market which opened early. Nick moved from time to time, but never seemed to again reach consciousness. His pain and confusion made her head ache as well, adding to the migraine she'd felt building since she'd last slept some two days ago. She'd gulped cup after cup of the hotel's complementary coffee, but at this point it was up in the air as to whether or not the caffeine helped or hurt matters. She looked back at the phone in disgust.

"Ring. Come on, Doctor. Talk to me."

RING RING. RING RING.

When the phone actually did ring, she nearly jumped out of her skin.

"Hello? Doctor Lambert, my name is Samantha Keller, with the RCMP. You may remember me, I'm working the Correlli killing? Yes, that's right. I'm sorry to contact you off duty, but...yes, I understand that you're busy, this won't take a moment." After all of these years, those lessons in phone courtesy still stick. My, momma must be proud. Get on with it. "Doctor Lambert, I'm calling about one of the detectives in Homicide, Detective Knight. I understand you know him fairly well. Are you familiar with his..." (What? Unusual dental records? Nocturnal habits? Propensity for long black capes and silly accents?) "...blood condition? You are? Great. Could I ask you to come see me? Yes, it's regarding Nick. He ran into a little trouble over at Vetter's apartment, and..."

"Good. I'm staying at the Toronto Hilton, room 505. Thank you, Doctor."

Samantha set the phone down and let out a sigh of relief. Lambert seemed to be aware of what was going on. In fact, from the tension in her voice, Sam thought that Nick and the good lady coroner were more than just friends. In any case, she was on her way over.

Killers who mesmerize their victims before carrying them through skylights unassisted, bar owners who are curiously magnetic in a murderous sort of way, and now vampire detectives. All in all it had been a long, strange couple of days. Exhausted, she sat down in the chair nearest the door and closed her eyes.

###

Doctor Lambert had been reassuringly brisk and efficient. Armed with pints of blood and enough surgical equipment to impress Hawkeye Pierce, she had quickly gotten Nick out of danger. Samantha had watched in detached fascination as Lambert deftly pulled long splinters out of his chest, which immediately began to heal over. Amazing what half a dozen pints of blood could do for a person.

Vampire.

Samantha closed her eyes for just a moment, and when she opened them again Dr. Lambert was doing something rude to her hand.

"Ow!"

"Sorry. Hold still, just another minute...okay, that's it." Natalie tied off the stick in Samantha's left hand, then began wrapping it in layers of gauze. "Mind telling me how this happened?" Her voice had the same tone doctor's voices always did when you'd done something stupid. Sam pulled her hand free as soon as the bandages were tied and flexed it experimentally. At her wince, Natalie shook her head.

"It's going to be sore for quite a while. You were lucky, though, and missed the tendons. Once it's healed over do some stretching exercises and it should be fine."

"Thanks. Is he going to be okay?" She pointed with her chin to the bed, where Nick appeared to be sleeping peacefully.

"A good day's sleep and he'll be fine. You know, I'd really like to know how you got involved in all of this. You seem to be taking all of this in stride, but I can't believe that this hasn't...widened your perspectives a little bit. Want to talk about it?"

Samantha shook her head wearily.

"Some other time. Can you stay with him, make sure he's going to be all right? I need to check on a few things, and I can't do it from here."

"Sure, but I think what you need is some sleep. And food. When was the last time you had either, Agent Keller?" Nat's voice was firm, but gentle. It had worked on Nick more than once, and seemed to be having the same affect on his strange savior. Samantha yawned mightily.

"Food sounds good." She looked down at her ruined clothes with distaste. "And maybe a shower. Okay. I'll go grab a quick shower, then we can order up some breakfast. In the mean time, leave the door locked, don't answer it, and don't answer the phone." At Nat's raised eyebrows, she added, "I don't think our bad guy will come after him right now, but it pays to be cautious. Do you know how to shoot a gun?" At Nat's reluctant nod, she said, "Good. I'll leave mine out here with you. Anyone tries to come in, don't get fancy, go for the body shot," she concluded with a stifled yawn.

"Okay, okay, go already." Nat waved her toward the bathroom, and Samantha willingly obeyed.

The setting of the sun awoke Nick from a deep, dreamless sleep. To a vampire, the vanishing of the sun is like a call to action, or to freedom, and awakening from the day's slumber comes with the sharp immediacy of diving into a mountain stream. He opened his eyes and sat up.

The slight twinge in his chest brought the memories of the night before flooding back, causing him to rub his chest in uneasy recollection. It had been many years since he had been so helpless, so very near death. A soft sigh from nearby brought him back from his painful memories. He was in a hotel room, with Nat asleep beside him on the wide bed. An unwilling smile crept to his lips, but the thought of teasing his good friend died when he saw her face.

Even in sleep, Natalie's face looked drawn with fear and worry. Dark shadows had formed under her eyes, and she slept on top of the covers in clothes that were spattered with his blood. She had probably stayed awake the entire day, watching over him as he slept, after working her normal shift the previous night. Gently, he reached out and brushed a lock of brown hair from her eyes. At this, her eyes opened wide in surprise.

"Nick?" Her hushed voice was filled with surprise and a deep relief which she couldn't hide as she struggled to sit up and patted futilely at her hair.

Nick had time to feel a pang of guilt for her needless concern before her face cleared and she raised a sardonic eyebrow.

"Boy, I wish my beauty sleep worked as well as yours does. How are you feeling?" Her voice, still hushed in a 'people are sleeping' manner, made him belatedly aware that there was someone else in the room. The darkened room was no problem for his vampire eyes, now that he knew to look.

"I've had a lot of practice," he replied absently. "Is that Keller?"

Natalie started to nod in reply, and saw that Nick was already rising, his head turned toward the sleeping officer. "Yeah. She brought you here after your little run-in with Tracy's attacker."

Nick's face darkened, and he paused to turn and look in Natalie's direction.

"How is she?"

"She's still up in ICU, but it looks like she's going to make it."

Natalie had risen from the bed as well, and was struggling to get her sleep-rumpled clothing in order. "Look, why don't we go into the bathroom for a minute. The light's better in there, and I'd like to take another look at your chest. Your wounds, I mean. You look a lot better, but I'm still not sure that I got all of the splinters out." She headed toward the bathroom without a backward glance.

When Nick arrived a moment later, Natalie was energetically splashing water on her face. Finished, she reached out blindly for the towel, which had fallen to the floor. Instead, her hand brushed against Nick. Her eyes flew open in surprise at the instant of contact with his bare arm, and she blinked rapidly at the water which dribbled into her eyes.

"God, you scared me! Do me a favor and make some noise when you walk into a room, would you?" Wordlessly she accepted the towel he proffered, and patted quickly at her face. "I'm sure that we can take these bandages off now. I'll go get my scissors, and--"

"Nat," Nick said gently. "Hang on a second." He reached out and lightly took her hand as she started to walk around him. "Last night must have been really tough for you." Natalie started to wave him off, but he continued. "I might not always say it, but I really appreciate what you do for me. You're always there when I need you, and I can't ever repay you for that. You're really something special, Natalie." With his free hand he reached out and lightly touched her cheek. "You know that, don't you?" They had drawn closer together as he spoke, and now looked uncertainly at each other from inches apart.

"Nick, you know that I--" Natalie broke off as she saw an image appear over Nick's shoulder in the bathroom mirror.

"Sorry. Am I interrupting something?" Samantha looked as rumpled at Natalie had, but her green eyes sparkled with amusement. "I really hate to break this up, but *somebody* let me oversleep," she shot an annoyed look at Natalie, "and we've got a bad guy to catch. Mind if I use the shower?" She nodded at Nick nonchalantly, and slipped by them to turn the shower on. Nick and Natalie looked at each other wordlessly, then surrendered the bathroom to their peculiar associate.

###

Azoth had displeased his Dark Lord.

That was the only explanation for the terrible turn of events the night before. Until then Azoth had been strong in his faith, sure that nothing could stop him from offering sacrifices to his god. Even the police woman who had dogged his steps for the last month had been no more than an inconvenience. She was canny and quick, but he had gifts far beyond anything she could hope to experience. And when he had stumbled upon the nightclub, he thought it was his Lord's will; here were many who would understand, who would help him in his unholy mission.

But it was not meant to be.

They had not understood. Worse, they had sent one of their own--puny, weak, but still one of them--to punish him for his transgressions. He had been forced to kill the pitiful creature quickly, with none of the ceremony required by his Lord. Even the man's pet had resisted him, turning her mind away from him long enough to inflict wounds which throbbed and pulsed with his every heartbeat even now. His face was swollen, the area around his left eye socket inflamed and red.

Another sacrifice was necessary. It would be more difficult to approach his victim now, with his face marred, but the difficulty would be part of his penance for failing with the blond woman. He would find another, and make the proper appeasement's before leaving this cursed city. Perhaps more than one, to show that he was not fleeing like a dog with it's tail between it's legs. An entire family, perhaps...

Humming happily to himself, he began to plan.

####3

Nick Knight was not a happy man.

His conversation with Natalie while Keller was in the shower had confirmed his fears: Samantha knew everything. While Samantha had assured them both that she had no intention of revealing his secret, (saying that people thought she was crazy enough as it is, and that '...there ain't no such animal as a Canadian X-Files, so who the heck would I tell, anyway?'), Nick wasn't quite so sure. She'd been hiding something, that much he was certain of. It hadn't helped matters that she asked remarkably few questions (far fewer than Nat had, years ago) and then said that she had an "errand" to run before they got to work.

In addition, his rookie partner had been badly injured, and might not even survive. The doctors said that they were hopeful, but seeing Tracy in the ICU unit, her face pale and drawn, had not convinced him. It was always had for him to accept that those he cared about would eventually age and die, but in cases like this it was even harder. Tracy was young and energetic, just getting started in her life. Now she was just another victim, with friends and family waiting nearby to see if she would live or die.

Vachon had been at the hospital, to Nick's surprise. Whether or not there was a relationship blooming between them Nick still didn't know, and from the look on Vachon's face, neither did he. Still, the younger vampire had agreed to stay at the hospital for the evening, in case the killer made another attempt at Tracy. Two uniformed police officers would also stand guard, but after the night before, Nick doubted that they would be very effective if the killer did indeed decide to pay Tracy a call. Pulling out of the hospital parking lot, Nick told himself that Tracy would be safe here. He didn't entirely believe it, but he knew that he would need every bit of his attention tonight if he was to find her attacker before the man killed again.

Samantha was waiting for him outside of The Raven, as she'd promised. The club had reopened that night, and from the look of things business was booming. Ducking through the crowd, he joined her as she turned and walked toward the alley adjoining the club.

"Get your errands taken care of?" he asked lightly.

"Yep. You wouldn't believe the story I had to tell the cleaners." She was still dressed as she had been earlier in the evening, well-worn blue jeans and a plain white shirt under her bulky down jacket.

When she didn't elaborate further, he added, "I checked on Tracy. Doctors say she's probably going to be okay. Metro put two patrolmen down there just in case."

"Mmm." Samantha pulled off her gloves, and traced the gray stone rear wall of the club. "He's not going after her. Too many people, too many lights," she replied absently.

"Is that an RCMP projection, or... something else? Something, personal?" At Samantha's sharp, guarded glance he continued. "I've seen people with gifts like yours before. Want to tell me about it?"

She snorted in disgust. "Gift? I'd have argued that with you when I was thirteen. I nearly ended up in a damn funny farm. I...someone's coming."

Nick was already turning as LaCroix appeared in the mouth of the alley, his long form clothed in black and dramatically backlit by the street lamps.

"You make such wonderful entrances," Samantha marveled. "Afraid we're going to scare away the clientele?" Her voice was light, but her eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Or is there something out here we're not supposed to see?"

LaCroix smiled thinly. "Still haven't solved your...problem, Nicolas? How unfortunate. Tick tock, tick tock." He shook his head in mock sorrow. Nick risked a glance at Samantha, but she had wandered away, one hand still tracing the stone wall. Nick hurried after her with LaCroix trailing slowly behind.

Samantha's face had a remote quality to it that Nick was beginning to recognize. She walked slowly along the wall, intent on something that he could not see. After a moment she paused and knelt to lightly touch the half-melted snow beneath their feet.

"It was cold, and barely sun-up. People were coming and going, but no one saw him come down the fire escape. He must have been covered in blood, but no one saw him. He's always so careful not to be seen. Somehow he's planning these ahead of time and we just haven't found the pattern. He knew to come here, and he knew how to get away. He knew..." she faded off uncertainly.

"An accomplice?" Nick added softly. "Someone to pick him up afterward?"

She shook her head. "No. He's alone. He's always alone." She shivered, and her face narrowed, her mouth tightening into a snarl. "<He/I come and go as I/he chooses. The pathways are cool, comforting. Very dark and dank. So very much like...>

"Home?" Keller's returned to it's own pitch, and she blinked in surprise. She was standing in front of a large wooden crate which was stained and warped with age. Behind her she could faintly here the two men who had followed her down the alleyway. Fragments of memory--someone's memory--came back to her: the sound of heavy boxes (*wooden* boxes) being shifted. The slide of metal on metal, the smell of fetid air.

"Here." She shoved experimentally at the crate, which refused to budge. Gritting her teeth, she set her feet and shoved again. Nothing. "Gentlemen, would one-" she stopped as a pair of black-gloved hands shoved the crates back easily. LaCroix was next to her, looking at her with an expression on his face that she couldn't read. Looking down, she saw that where the crate had covered the cement there was a heavy, metallic manhole cover.

"Bingo," she breathed softly.

Nick shook his head. "We checked the sewer system. There wasn't any sign that he went that way." He looked over she shoulder skeptically.

"The main sewer system, sure. But take a look at this." She knelt and rubbed lightly at the grime covering the manhole's lettering.

"'Property of Toronto City Department of Transportation'," Nick read. "It must have been part of the subway system they were talking about putting in a few years ago. But how did *he* know about it?"

"Don't know," Samantha replied. Replacing her heavy gloves, she then slid her fingers into the holes in the lid and with a small grunt of effort slid the heavy cover out of the way. Rubbing her nose with the back of one hand, she offered them a slow smile which never quite reached her eyes.

"Let's ask him."

The manhole had lead down into a service walkway which had clearly not been serviced in a long while. The cheap cement which had been used in it's construction had begun to seep with moisture from the 'temporary' drainage system, and bits of the walls and ceiling had crumbled to the floor where it crunched under their feet. Aside from the light from Samantha's flashlight it was pitch black, and every metallic surface was covered with a thin layer of slime. LaCroix wiped one glove clean with distaste after inadvertently brushing against an exposed support beam.

"Charming. You are quite sure your killer came this way? This is certainly not the most practical method of travel he could have chosen. Or perhaps this just suits your sense of the dramatic?"

Samantha grinned. Her shot at 'dramatic entrances' must have hit close to the mark. "He came through here. There were fresh scratch marks on the manhole cover and," she bent down, "this looks like a bead from the Correlli woman's necklace." Pulling out an evidence bag she deposited the small faux pearl in it then absently tucked it away again.

"LaCroix, you don't have to do this. This is our responsibility now." Nick kept his voice neutral with effort. He knew from long experience that to show a strong desire for his master to act in a certain way was to invite the opposite.

LaCroix was not fooled.

"Nonsense. I have an interest in this matter, as you well know, Nicolas. And, as a good police officer, you shall be obliged to arrest this man. After which, of course, he will doubtless plead insanity and provide the police with the most *amazing* of stories to prove this. Stories which would be best left untold," he concluded meaningfully, flicking his glance to Keller. She responded by raising one eyebrow expressionlessly.

"I expect that our suspect is going to resist arrest. Strenuously. Are you going to have a problem with that, Nick?" she said calmly.

"No," Nick replied. Truthfully, he felt the same way. The killer knew far too much, and was dangerously insane. More importantly, the man had hurt Nick and someone close to him, and the vampire within him clamored for revenge.

But it wasn't just the killer that LaCroix was referring to. Whether she knew it or not, Samantha was in deadly danger. LaCroix meant to see that the Code was obeyed, and had no compunctions about killing to do so.

####

Azoth was mighty once again.

His god had accepted his sacrifice of the woman and her husband, and now he felt the power flow through him once again. The man had proven especially satisfying after Azoth had allowed the man watch as Azoth dealt with the man's wife. Rage was good, but despair and grief, when combined with pain in the proper proportion, was the sweetest elixir Azoth had ever known. The female child he had dealt with almost as an afterthought, her young mind shattered by the sights she had seen. Still, even that had it's uses...

Standing back to survey his work, Azoth breathed in the heady scent of blood and pain that he had created in his lord's name. His own pain was gone, the missing eye no more than an inconvenience soon remedied. Bending down, he removed one eye from the woman's staring face. Curiously, she reminded him of someone. Someone from long ago.

(Mother?)

<A woman's face looming over him, twisted with hate.

<"Look what you've done! You're a nasty, filthy little boy! I ought to cut your eyes out!"

<"I'm sorry, mommy. Please don't, please don't...">

No. Azoth was strong. Had always been strong. This was some weak, puling thing. Not Azoth. He examined the eye carefully, but saw only his own reflection on it's dull surface. After a moment's consideration, he placed it in his own empty socket. The pain was bad, but faded almost immediately. As it did so, his dark lord whispered a warning in reward.

<someone's coming>

Lifting his head, he sniffed the air and listened.

<the woman was coming. and two others. they meant to stop him. chase him from their territory.>

So soon. He did not wish the men harm, even the one whose pet he had toyed with. The man had survived, which told Azoth that he too served their dark lord. Perhaps they were his master's warning that he had stayed too long in this city. A thank you was in order, then, and a small whimpering from the corner told him how it might be done.

It was cold in the tunnels, but only Samantha suffered from the chill. Rubbing her gloved hands together, she fought to keep her concentration on the matter at hand. They had been walking in these dark corridors for over an hour, wandering almost aimlessly through the maze of incomplete service walkways. More than once they had been forced to turn back when the tunnel abruptly dead-ended in a blank wall or crumbled masonry. Try as she might, the feel of the killer's mind eluded her.

Instead, her mind kept returning to the two men who followed almost silently behind her. Knight was a blend of anger and concern, a darkness overlaid by adopted compassion. He would back her play against the monster they chased, but his own fears blurred his reactions. Whether or not his would make a difference in how their pursuit ended she didn't know.

LaCroix was a different story. On the surface he was tightly controlled, a master of himself and others. Beneath it, however, she caught occasional flashes of pleasure in the hunt, and of...(curiosity?) for herself. Not quite admiration, (unless perhaps it was the admiration for a well-trained bloodhound), but for the moment she had caught his interest. Whether it would be enough to keep him from trying to kill her when this was over was unclear.

Mentally she shook herself. The killer would almost certainly strike tonight, and then he would be gone again. Musings about handsome, dangerous vampires would have to wait.

<someone's coming>

She stopped in her tracks, forcing the men to do the same in the narrow corridor. "Did you hear something?"

"Nothing," LaCroix replied, his voice a study in boredom. "And I can assure you that I would hear someone approaching long before you would, Agent Keller. One of the side effects of our...condition. The only mortal heartbeat that I can hear," he leaned forward to whisper in her ear, "is yours."

"Wait," Nick said softly. LaCroix looked irritably over at his long-ago fledgling. Nicolas had no sense of humor.

But Nicolas wasn't looking at them. Instead, he sniffed delicately at the damp air.

"What?"

"Blood. Up ahead. Not far, I think." He turned slightly away from Samantha as he drew his gun until the vampire was hidden within him once more. LaCroix sniffed, then nodded.

"And fresh, too. It would appear that we are too late."

They had traced the smell of blood down the corridor and up a slime-covered ladder into what had apparently been intended as an office during the subway construction. Faded maps and schematics still lined the walls, but now they were covered in blood. More blood dripped from the ceiling, and from the large metal table which dominated the room. On it lay the remains of a white male, age indeterminate. Sprawled in a metal chair next to him was a white female, both horribly disfigured. Smoke and the smell of burnt flesh lingered in the room, emanating from a pile of half-burned skin and tissue resting in the center of a pentagram drawn in blood.

Pulling her eyes from the gruesome remains, Samantha scanned the room, already knowing that their prey was gone. Again and again as she tried to analyze the room for clues, her eyes were drawn back to the sad, horrible shapes that the killer had left behind. Even her vampire companions seemed momentarily taken aback at the brutality of the murders. In silence they walked around the small room, taking in the filthy cot, the collection of newspaper clippings which he had taped to one wall. Another ladder was attached to the far wall, and lead up to a hatchway in the ceiling.

Nick reached for his radio, and Samantha put a hand on his arm.

"Let's wait a minute, okay?" Without saying any more she turned and walked resolutely toward the makeshift bed the killer had left behind. Taking a deep breath, she sat down and removed her gloves, kneading the blanket's rough material.

"Talk to me." Closing her eyes, she shut out the horror of the room, the danger of the men she was with. Only her prey mattered. He had been here, slept here. Planned here. He had thought about...

<The way the blood shone in the moonlight, the sweet music of their cries. In exchange for his freedom in this bright, shining place, his lord demanded sacrifice.>

That was pointless. Psychotics always imagined that they were special, that their atrocities had a purpose. Try again.

<He had not always been powerful. Images of a sacrifice, of a boon requested. A presence answering, darkness, DARKNESS! A black evil like nothing she had ever felt, swarming over her/his soul, engulfing her. From far away she heard voices calling her name, but the darkness was here, now. It was reaching for her...>

No. For him. Resolutely, she pushed deeper. Abruptly, a voice spoke clearly in her head.

<I've left you a present>

The words were followed in her head by a low, malignant laugh, and then she was back on the bed, with Nick shaking her shoulders.

"Samantha. Can you hear me?"

"There's something here. Someone." Forming the words with her mouth, pulling back out had never been so hard. Something whispered to her darkest thoughts, dragging her back down.

"Nonsense. There is no one else here." LaCroix's voice brought her back to reality with a jerk. He was standing above her, tension in his face. Apparently even LaCroix hadn't seen everything, yet.

"I'm okay, Nick. He knew we were coming. He left something for us, some kind of message, I think. It wasn't very clear..." Suddenly, her eyes happened on a small doll, half covered with blood and cast aside.

"They had a daughter. She's still here. Somewhere." She looked around the small room in frustration. Where?

"I don't see where...wait." Nick got up and walked across the room, carefully avoiding the pools of blood that had formed. He stopped where a chair had been pushed against the wall, moved it aside. Behind it, partially obscured by the blood, was a narrow closet door. LaCroix and Samantha gathered behind him as he slowly opened the door.

Inside was a small blond girl of about seven, her blue eyes staring in death at nothing. She had been stuffed casually inside the closet like a long-forgotten Raggedy Ann doll, her limbs in unnatural positions. Nick made a small sound of pity in his throat, and gently reached out to close the child's eyes. At his touch she shuddered, her mouth working convulsively. He pulled back with a jerk and stumbled to his feet.

She blinked slowly, then smiled a terrible, gore-filled smile, tilting her head to one side in a grotesque parody of manners.

"I'm so sorry that I couldn't be here to welcome you to my home in person, but I'm sure that you can understand why I must be away." The voice, deep and mocking, that came from her mouth was that of the man who had nearly killed Nick the night before. "Perhaps we will meet again under more pleasant circumstances. In the mean time, might I extend to you gentlemen a peace offering? This vessel is, I'm quite sure, still warm, and deliciously innocent." He/she laughed unpleasantly. "But, I forget, you've brought your own." The child's smile widened, and she dropped one eyelid in a slow wink. "Bon appetit."

With that the girl's eyes rolled up into her head, and she slumped bonelessly outward. Her head landed with a dull thump on the cement floor, the sound echoing loudly in the silent room.

###

For several moments there was no sound from within the small room save for the breath and heartbeat of its' one mortal occupant. Finally, LaCroix pulled off one glove and knelt beside the child's body.

"She's been dead for some time." His pale fingers brushed lightly over her paler skin, feeling little warm and no life there. Dead, the child had regained all of the innocence that she had lost mere moments ago, her face now a mask of sweet sadness.

"I've never seen anything like it," Nick said, his voice hushed. "LaCroix, you've seen--"

"Nothing like this. I've heard stories, of course." He started to elaborate, then uncharacteristically paused as Samantha stepped forward to stand beside them.

"I have." He voice was soft, and her face as she looked down at the dead child was both remote and vulnerable. "Back in New Orleans. My partner and I were investigating a series of murders that had some kind of voodoo involvement. We didn't take it seriously. You know. Who believes in magic?" She smiled faintly. "Or vampires? Anyway, he went to talk to a witness, never came back. He was young, younger than me. My responsibility." She trailed off uncertainly, then risked a look at each of them to see if they understood. They did.

"I was a good tracker even then. Knew it, too. Didn't take me more than a few hours to find him. What was left of him. They'd...they'd cut him up pretty bad. He was just a kid, you know? I thought I was

handling it pretty good right up until he opened his eyes. Told me that I'd let him die. Then he pulled one of the knives they'd used right out of his own body, and came after me. The look in his eyes, it was a lot like this little girl's." She laughed shortly.

"Later the Bureau couldn't understand why I'd put thirteen rounds into my partner's corpse. They put me on medical leave, and gave the case to someone else. Case wasn't ever solved. After a while I got tired of the way folks looked at me in the halls, and came up here." She smiled more fully this time, and turned to better face Nick.

"That's why you and yours don't shake me much, I expect. There's a lot of things in this world you can't pin down and dissect like a bug. Lot of strange, peculiar things." She stepped back so that she could see both men clearly. "Not that you two aren't at the top of the list."

LaCroix made an ironic half bow, and Nick managed a half smile.

"Now, are you two gonna fall on me, or are we gonna go catch that son of a bitch?"

"Wait." LaCroix held up one hand and gestured his companions to silence. In the ensuing quiet he listened again for sounds which only his superior vampire senses could hear. Beyond the slow, steady beat of the Keller woman's heart and the soft scuffle of rats around them, something else tickled at his attention.

They had been traveling through these accursed tunnels for what seemed like hours. The sharp turns and narrow, damp walkways reminded him uncomfortably of the Paris sewers that he and his companions had been forced to hide in during the burning of Paris in 1870. At least **they** had not starved, unlike so many of the mortals above them...

"What is it?" Nicolas' voice was the barest of whispers.

"Just ahead. Can you not feel it, Nicolas? Have your senses become so dulled? **Listen**."

Nick closed his eyes and stretched tentatively outward. At the edges of his awareness, something flickered. Something (**black, malignant**) familiar. He had been searching for a mortal, but what Nick sensed was something else entirely. More like the feel of another vampire. Powerful, dark. A malevolence that now turned briefly to him before continuing on.

"He knows we're here." Samantha's soft voice brought Nick back to his companions. LaCroix was nodding his agreement. Wordlessly they increased their pace.

Two sharp turns and the tunnel came to an abrupt end. A crumbling cement wall blocked their way, with a fragile ladder leading upward into the darkness. Nick pulled on the ladder to test its' strength, then moved upward, quickly disappearing into the dark above. LaCroix and Samantha followed closely behind, each locked in their own thoughts.

###

WHOOOONK!

The hot blast of air from the passing bus felt good on Samantha's face, even as the honk from the irate driver sent her pulse racing. The ladder had led them up to a manhole in the center of Fourteenth Street, which was busy even at this late hour. Traffic sped by on either side of them, with their prey nowhere in sight. Both men scanned the surrounding area, their eyes narrowing to see what was beyond mortal sight. Warm living bodies stood out against the cold background like torches, but the man they sought was no where to be found.

LaCroix turned and grabbed Keller by the shoulders.

"Where is he? Where has he gone now, Samantha?" His eyes blazed with a fierce eagerness which Nick had not seen in many years. After so many years, LaCroix had apparently found a challenge worthy of his talents.

LaCroix belatedly remembered his own strength as Samantha flinched and pulled back. He released the mortal quickly, and she rubbed at her shoulders where he had gripped her.

"I don't know. He's, hiding from me somehow."

"We don't have much time," Nick cautioned. Behind them, the skin was tinged with the first light of false dawn.

"What do you want from me? It just isn't that easy." Samantha looked from side to side, searching for something, anything. "It's not like turnin' on a radio, or flippin' on the TV. I can't just say, 'Oh, yeah, he's that way. Gonna take a bus to Edmonton, check out the...mall'." She blinked in surprise.

"The bus station? He's taking a bus out of town?" Nick said, surprised. Behind him, LaCroix smiled thinly.

"It would appear that our signal has come in," LaCroix added dryly.

"Yeah, maybe so. Still, something's not right. He's got something up his sleeve, something...hidden." She shook her head. "If he knows we're coming, we could be walking into a trap." Another bus went by, and they were forced to wait until the noise died down before continuing.

"Nonetheless, it would appear to be our best shot."

"Maybe so, but how are we going to get there in time? I get the feeling that he's not going to wait all that long."

Nick grinned, and looked casually in both directions.

"We don't need *roads*."

"What are you talking about? We'll never get a 'copteeeeeer!" Samantha's jaw dropped in stunned surprise as Nick casually lifted the both of them into the air and into the waning night.

#####

"There. The big guy with the dark jacket."

"Got him. LaCroix, you-" Nick bit off his instructions. LaCroix was no where in sight. "Okay, I'll go around to the other side. See if you can't get security to start clearing the area." He then stepped back outside and disappeared.

"Wonderful."

Samantha looked around the bus terminal in disgust. Despite the late hour better than a dozen people milled around, waiting for their bus to arrive. In addition, there were ticket sellers, drivers, janitors, and other staff to worry about. Nick had snuck off to take out her man, leaving her to cover his backside, and that of a handful of half-asleep civilians.

"I am *really* going to have a long talk with that boy. S'cuse me, sir, can I talk to you for a minute?" The portly security guard ambled obediently in her direction and she quickly began to explain the situation.

The situation was looking up. Nick dropped lightly to the ground on the terminal's tarmac, out of sight of the passenger loading area. Their suspect had been heading out toward the bus waiting here, and grabbing him away from the other waiting passengers would keep innocent people from getting involved. (Or seeing something they shouldn't) he mentally added.

Nick stepped around the corner of the terminal, then was forced to step back as a crowd disgorged from the idling bus and headed immediately toward the warm, brightly lit terminal. Sticking his head around the edge of the building, Nick saw the heavily-bundled crowd part like water as they passed a tall, powerfully built man in a dark blue coat who stood like a rock in their river. The man waited patiently for them to pass, then deliberately looked in Nick's direction.

With a cool, mocking smile, the man opened his coat, revealing a small, clearly terrified young boy. The boy looked to be about seven, and his blond hair and blue eyes suggested a relationship to the girl they'd found earlier.

"Bastard," Nick whispered softly. Nodding as if he'd heard Nick, the man grabbed the boy by the arm, turned and walked back inside.

LaCroix sighed with disappointment. Nicolas had had the correct idea in waiting until the man had separated himself from the other mortals before attempting to catch him. It would have been child's play to then take the man from Nicolas and eliminate the problem. One of them, he amended. Once this unusual creature had been taken care of, there would still be the matter of the police officer. She was, he was quite sure, well aware of the danger that she is in. That she pursued her prey regardless suggested that she had some sort of plan with which to try to save herself. It was almost a pity that The Code required her death; it had been many years since he had been so entertained by a mere mortal.

Azoth jerked the sacrifice back into the shelter of the swarm of little humans. The sacrifice whined softly in protest, but the injunction against speech which Azoth had imposed held. In any case, the boy's fear (which flowed from him in delicious waves) would have kept him too terrified to speak should that injunction waver. The weak beast and the other, much stronger one waited for them outside. The woman, though he could not feel her now, was undoubtedly nearby. He scanned the terminal, never loosening his grip on his next sacrifice. Azoth had half hoped to leave without confronting these pale hunters, but his Lord had seen fit to make it otherwise. His leaving of this place now would be drenched in blood, a glorious tribute to his Dark Lord.

Samantha swore softly under her breath as the killer stepped back into the terminal, holding a small boy in front of himself like a shield. Passengers from the incoming bus now swarmed around the terminal, heading for the public phones or restrooms, or moving to stare out the front windows as they waited for their rides. Very few simply left the building, and it would be next to impossible to get them all out without alerting their prey. (Well, if you can't move the mountain...) Grabbing a disreputable-looking scarf that was sticking out of a nearby garbage can, she pulled it down over her hair and slumped her shoulders. Carrying an empty shopping bag, Samantha shuffled slowly toward the killer, her right hand clutching the pistol inside her coat pocket.

Gun out, Nick carefully approached the rear entrance to the bus terminal. Through the glass he could see better than two dozen people milling about, apparently looking for the now non-existent staff. In the middle of this confusion was their target, his back partially to Nick as the man looked slowly around the brightly-lit terminal. It would be pathetically easy for the man to take an additional hostage, or even hold the entire terminal if he had a gun. Nick knew that he could take an ordinary mortal under circumstances like these. But this was no ordinary mortal, and to allow this many people to see the vampire... For a brief moment Nick wished that he'd followed procedure and called for backup, then grinned in spite of himself. The idea of explaining LaCroix, and Samantha's rather unique methods of tracking, were enough to make his head ache. They would just have to make do. Speaking of which, where was Keller?

As Nicolas stepped quietly into the building, LaCroix gritted his teeth in annoyance. His perch on top of the terminal's roof was ideal for observing outside events, but somewhat lacking once the entertainment moved indoors. Knowing that Nicolas would certainly be needing his assistance, LaCroix dropped lightly over the side of the building.

Samantha continued shuffling toward the killer, her face lowered beneath the ratty scarf to avoid any chance of his recognizing her. Flicking her eyes up briefly, she caught a glimpse of Nick as he slipped in through the back doors. Running one finger over the safety of her gun to make sure that it was off, she brushed past heavily burdened passengers and closed with her target.

There she was. Nick straightened up from the water cooler and looked into the reflective surface of the terminal's big rear window. Beneath a ragged scarf and shuffling walk, Samantha was approaching the killer from his blind side. His back still to the two of them, Nick sidled closer.

The weaker beast glowed with power, a power both familiar and at odds with Azoth's own. Azoth doubted that the man would provoke a rematch among all of these little mortals. Pity.

He'd have to do it himself.

The youngling sacrifice was becoming tiring. All that whimpering, the small heart beating a frantic, trapped rhythm. A pity there wasn't time for more elaborate ceremony, but one can always make up for a lack of quality with sufficient quantity. With a casual twist of his wrist, Azoth jerked the boy to him, then slashed the throat with one expert sweep of the blade he held in his left hand. Blood sprayed outward in a lovely fountain, quite red against the buzzing fluorescents overhead. Azoth cast the boy aside, sending the child crashing into an old hag waiting at the ticket window. He didn't pause to enjoy the sight of his opening gambit, reaching instead for his second. A bag lady, one of the wretches of this earth, was conveniently near and he reached for her, intending to throw her at the approaching man. Azoth had a brief moment to realize that the hand holding the tattered shopping bag was smooth and clean before his hand made--

<<CONTACT!!>>

Samantha's head reeled under the force of the black cloud which suddenly enveloped her. Images collided off of each other and off of her own rage and disgust at the animal in front of her. A dark, malignant Thing turned it's head and fixed it's interest on her.

<<NO!>>

Azoth recoiled, slashing out blindly with his knife in an attempt to shut out the unwelcome images the witch had shown him. Still her hand cling to his, her green eyes too knowing. In revulsion he flung the woman from him, and the images mercifully ceased as something else snatched at him and sent him flying.

Nick knew even as he launched himself at the killer that he was too late. Fresh bloodsmell filled the air, along with the first screams of terrified passengers. Moving faster than any human had a right to, he nonetheless reached the man only after the man had cast Samantha aside like a broken doll. Red fury filled him, and with a snarl he lifted the mortal in front of him and flicked him with one hand across the length of the terminal. More screams were added to the cacophony, but he paid them no heed as he turned to walk toward the twisted, bleeding body of the killer.

The other killer.

Azoth pulled himself free of broken shards of bolted-down chairs and black and white television, struggling to his feet in disbelief. *Pain* filled his body, his powerful, immortal body. His right arm seemed useless, and his good eye blinked rapidly as hot, sticky blood trickled into it. For one horrible moment he even thought that the weak, puling sounds he heard were his own.

No, thank the Dark Lord. With his good arm Azoth lifted the old woman from the wreckage he had made and drew her in front of him. She squawked and struggled until he had her properly in place, then grew stiff and silent as she saw the man approaching them.

Nick walked slowly across the terminal, his footsteps echoing loudly in the sudden quiet. Some of the mortal passengers had regained enough sense to flee, but most had gone shocky-quiet, waiting to see which of them would be next.

Good. That would keep them out of his way.

The mortal animal in front of him snatched up a mortal shield, but Nick knew that it didn't matter. The man was injured, slow.

His.

"Let the woman go." Nick's voice was flat, and brooked no contradiction. His quarry smiled in response, but Nick could see that the smile was forced, and could hear the heart quicken beneath the man's flesh. Nick smiled in return, showing the only weapons that he would need.

"Not just yet." Despite his injuries, Azoth's voice was strong. "The lady and I haven't finished our dance." He leered, and reached forward to plant a bloody kiss on the woman's cheek. She flinched, and began to whisper fervently under her breath.

"I think you have." Nick began to walk forward again. "There's nowhere for you to run. No where to hide." He stopped a few feet away, and fixed the mortal killer with the full force of his power.

"Let...the woman...*go*."

The shudder ran through the man's body, and for a moment the blade at the woman's throat wavered. His face twitched convulsively, then forced itself into a sneer.

"That the best you've got, boy? I was centuries old when your master was born. Why not just give it up? Give up your pathetic posturings. Can't you feel her fear? We could *bathe* in it. Together." His last word came out as a whisper, and he pressed the blade firmly against the old woman's throat. A thin trickle of blood welled up and spilled down her throat and onto her high lace collar.

The bloodsmell and scent of fear heavy in the air brought old memories flooding back. Memories of the early days, before he tried to change (deny?) what he was. They had been powerful, then. Feared. Resolutely he pushed the memories away, but the feeling remained. Azoth smiled.

Nick turned his attention the man's mortal shield. In the old days, she would have been/was--

Was a terrified human being, tears of fear spilling down wrinkled, dark brown cheeks. Her clothing was simple but elegant, now stained with both Azoth's blood and her own. Far to one side an older black man begged softly for them not to hurt her, his voice a blend of love and agony. Now that he listened, Nick could make out what she was whispering as well. It was the Lord's Prayer.

As he took an involuntary step forward, her eyes widened in fear. Fear of him.

"*No.*" His whisper was a denial. A denial of what he had been. What this monster was. He pushed the vampire back inside. He could control it, use it only when he chose to. He could. The killer's smile slowly faded, then brightened again as his eyes caught something behind Nick.

"Ah, the lovely Agent Keller. Come back for another dance, my dear?" His eyes narrowed slightly, and something flickered briefly across his face, was gone. Nick risked a quick glance behind him.

Samantha Keller stood awkwardly behind him, one hip canted upward as she tried to keep her weight off that leg, which was slicked with blood. A second gash in her scalp had spilled blood down her face, leaving her eyes shining brightly through a mask of blood. A faint smile played over her lips.

"Sam?" Nick's stunned whisper brought no response. She had eyes only for her prey. From behind him, he heard a carefully casual question.

"Cat got your tongue? Or perhaps it was the plate glass." She shook her head in response, and small fragments of glass rained downward. Behind her, blood and glass marked her trail back to the large plate glass window through which he'd thrown her. Her smile never wavered.

"I see you." Her voice was soft, mocking. "I *see*." She lifted one hand toward her forehead in emphasis, but her eyes never left his. "You wanted so much to be different, to be *special*, didn't you Mikey?"

"THAT'S NOT MY NAME! I am *Azoth*. I am a Great Beast, not some puny mortal. You try my patience, woman." There was defiance in his voice, but his lips trembled until he clamped them tightly shut.

"No." Her voice was soft and steady through her smile. "You're nothin' but a little boy, Mikey. And you've been very bad, haven't you? That's what your momma always told you, isn't it? That's why you needed to be punished so much. Your momma saw what you are, Mikey. That's why she used the clothespin. The scissors. The oil. She *saw*."

Azoth rubbed reflexively at the thick scar on one wrist before he realized that he was doing it. "No. That was some weak mortal, woman. Not me. I am strong. I have always been strong."

"Even later, when momma was put away for doing the Bad Thing, you were weak. You were bad. Hurtin' the animals made you feel better for a while, but it always came back, didn't it Mikey? The weakness. Later on, the women saw it. That's why you couldn't get it up. They were laughing at you inside, weren't they?"

Behind her, Nick could see LaCroix speak to the security guard, after which the mortal began quietly leading people out of the building. LaCroix then turned and began walking slowly toward them. The killer seemed almost hypnotized by Samantha's words, and Nick began to sidle slowly towards him. Samantha's soft voice droned on.

"You thought He would give you power, didn't you, Mikey? Make you strong, so no one would ever laugh at you again. You gave yourself to him, sold your soul for a chance to be something other than a weak, pathetic excuse for a human being." Her voice had been gradually losing the soft southern drawl it had in times of crisis, and had begun to thicken. Now, still whispering, she mocked him in a parody of Azoth's own deep rumble.

"Does it feel better now, Mikey? Does killing the weak and defenseless make you feel powerful? The smell of their blood is intoxicating, isn't it? Their fear like the sweetest of flowers. You can do to them everything that your momma did to you, that you wanted to do to her. Make them pay. Make them all pay."

"But it doesn't do a bit of good, does it Mikey?" Her voice had regained its gentle, feminine quality, but the accent was that of a Quebecois woman a good many years older than herself. "You're still just the same sad, pathetic little boy you always were. I tried to tell you that you were no good, but you just wouldn't listen. I can see it. They all can. Underneath all that bravado, you're just a scared little---"

"NOOOO!" Azoth/Mikey tossed the old woman aside and launched himself at her. He would shut her up. Stop her vile lies. He wasn't weak. He wasn't. He would rend her into pieces and lick her blood from--

Out of nowhere hands snatched at him and stopped his flight, slamming him to the ground with enough force to knock the wind from his body. (momma?) He pushed the stray though away, then shoved outward. The man gave way before his great strength, and Azoth forced himself to his knees before weakness suddenly betrayed him and he sagged forward.

(momma please, i'm sorry. i'll try to be better, momma *please*)

A hand dug into his hair and pulled his head sharply back. He opened his eyes.

Nick stood above the killer, pulling the skin taught against the man's throat. The jugular vein weakly against the skin, taunting him. The man could never go to trial. He deserved to die. It would be only fitting that he die as a victim. Nick dipped his head down toward the waiting pulse.

"Nicolas." LaCroix's voice was soft, but insistent. Nick looked up in irritation. "Not this one, Nicolas." LaCroix had stopped just behind Keller, and was holding up one hand in warning. "You do not want *this* creature's blood flowing through your veins, Nicolas."

Nick looked back down into the man's eyes, one of which stared unseeing over his right shoulder. The bloodsmell was powerful, but underneath it, there was something else. Something tainted. Sickness ran through this mortal, a sickness which no medicine could heal. To drink from it might be to take that sickness into himself. The man's one good eye blinked, then fixed in Nicolas' own.

"please..." The word bubbled up through blood-stained lips. Was it a plea for mercy? Or for forgiveness?

"Go to hell." Nick grasped the man's chin and twisted brutally up and to the side. There was a sickening crunch. Nick released his hold and wiped his hands distastefully on his coat as the body slumped bonelessly outward to land with a meaty thump on the blood-spattered tile.

hhhaaaaa Air slipped softly and finally from his parted lips as Mikey stared blindly outward into nothingness.

"Very good, Nicolas. Now, why don't we--" LaCroix stopped abruptly and his eyes widened in disbelief as oily black smoke began to trickle from the dead man's eyes. In front of him, Samantha, whose head and shoulders had slumped forward with the death of Mikey suddenly jerked upright, her eyes widening in horror.

"No..."

Something black and shapeless launched itself from the body of Michael Ramsey and toward Samantha. Nick reached out in a blur of vampire speed, but his hand caught nothing but icy smoke. It reached Samantha a second later and she collapsed with a scream of fear and pain.

Blackness surrounded her. It caressed her, prodded her, filled every part of her being. It was as sweet as the first whiff of rotted fruit and as seductive as the first temptation. Part of her understood it, called to it. But another part, the stronger part, rebelled. The darkness wanted to rule her. It wanted to remake her into a pale copy of itself as it had Mikey.

No. As she took a deep breath to cry out for help, the darkness slid into her, choking her. Gagging, she fell to her knees in the darkness, frantically trying to expel the darkness from her lungs. It was no use. The darkness swarmed over her eyes, and she knew she was lost.

Through the encroaching blackness she felt a hand on her shoulder. It was ice cold, but steady and calm. The darkness stirred around her in warning.

"*Fight*," the hand's owner whispered in her ear. "*See it* for what it truly is, not what it wishes you to see." Amidst the horror around her, the voice was fierce and proud. That voice would never surrender. She forced her eyes open and stared into the darkness around her. "Not with your *eyes*, woman," the voice chided her.

Open herself up to this? This horror?

"No. I'm...I'm afraid." The ultimate confession. It was fear that now choked her, numbed her very soul.

"Then use it. Conquer your fear, my dear, or it *will* conquer you." The voice and the hand then vanished, leaving her alone in the darkness. The darkness jeered at her, mocked her fear and pain. But there was something else. Something...fearful? Tentatively, she let down the barriers which kept her sane in the physical world, and reached outward.

The beast was as evil as she had seen, but now that evil was tainted by something else. Something familiar... Cautiously, she pushed further.

"You're afraid," she whispered incredulously. "The great beast Azoth is *afraid*. Afraid because...because without me, without a mortal host, you'll die. And that terrifies you, doesn't it?" Hot denial flooded over her, but she knew the truth. "You want me? Come and get me."

The darkness surged forward.

Nick watched numbly as Samantha writhed in pain on the cold tile floor. LaCroix bent over her briefly, then looked up and shook his head, whether in annoyance or concern Nick couldn't be sure. Outside, the remaining passengers shivered and waited for the police. Far away, a siren screamed toward them. They wouldn't have to wait long. In front of him, Samantha took a deep breath, then slammed one fist against the floor.

"No one...owns...me." She slammed her fist down again. "No one." Her body stiffened as if an electrical current had surged through it, then slumped limply to the floor. Above them, the electrical lights suddenly blew out and the remains of the front window shattered explosively outward. A black cloud drifted up from Keller's body, coalescing briefly before beginning to drift apart on the winter drafts which flooded the nearly empty terminal.

<NOOOOoooooooo...>

Nick and LaCroix pressed hands to their foreheads as the mental cry reverberated through them, fading quickly to a whimper, and then to silence. Between and below them, Samantha shuddered, then lifted her head.

"Well, that was fun." Ignoring her injured leg, she began to pull herself to her feet, then swayed alarmingly. LaCroix deftly reached out and caught one elbow. She nodded her thanks vaguely. "Let's not do that again, shall we?" His voice was faint, but hers and hers alone. After a moment Nick found his voice as well.

"Sounds like a good idea to me. Now why don't we get you to a hospital?"

She shook her head.

"Hate hospitals. People dyin', cryin. Makes my head hurt. 'Sides, I think you've got other pressin' concerns." She nodded with her head at the rear windows of the terminal, through which could be seen the first faint light of dawn.

###

In the end, they had all left together, LaCroix sniffing at being forced to use the sewer systems yet again. None of them had much to say. At last they reached familiar territory. The Raven was just above. Sanctuary. Janette or some previous, unknown owner had seen that certain modifications were made to the original system, and they were able to pass directly from the sewer into a carefully-hidden passage which lead into the club's cellar. They ascended the final steps to the main floor in silence.

"I'm going to call Natalie." At Samantha's protest, he added, "You need a doctor. Besides, Nat's probably going crazy with curiosity by now. She's got to know that we were there, and," he paused as LaCroix looked up sharply. What could--

"Yes." A voice like a dull blade cut the darkness. The house lights flickered on, revealing three men in heavy winter coats standing on the dance stage. "Many people were witness to your activities." The voice belonged to a tall, thin man whose face and bearing proclaimed him an Enforcer.

"We caught the killer," Nick began hopelessly. "A mortal. There won't be any more publicity." He nodded back toward the bar, where the killer's last public message had been left.

"Yes," the man continued. "We have no problems with that solution, although you could have been a little more...discreet? What concerns us, Nicolas, is your other loose end. Not very tidy, leaving a one such as this alive."

"She's no threat to us."

The Enforcer snorted in reply. "A police officer--a *hunter*--knows about us. You know what The Code requires."

"It's not--"

"Hang on a minute." Samantha slipped painfully off of her bar stool and walked up to Nick, on hand clamped over a white towel pressed against her side. "This is the part where you tell me that I know too much, right? Much too dangerous to live, that sort of thing?" She looked calmly across the room

toward the waiting Enforcers.

"More or less. You're quite right, you do know too much, Agent Keller. You must die to protect our secret, or," he glanced first at Nick, then lingered longer over LaCroix, "you must be brought across. It's really quite simple."

"Brought across? Oh, be made a vampire. Well, I've got to tell you, William, I've got a little problem with that. See, I haven't finished working on my tan yet." She tried to smile cheekily, but all that she could managed was a wan, pale smile. "And for the other, well, let's just say I've got a deep moral objection to dyin', huh?"

The three Enforcers made no reply, but dropped easily from the stage to the floor and began walking toward her. She continued gamely.

"Why don't we talk about option number three?"

"There is no other option."

"Well, I kinda think there is. See, after I ran into Nick here, and he ran into a stake, well, I started thinking. Started thinking that maybe I needed a backup plan. So I made copies of all of my notes, as well as little bits of some very interesting blood and tissue samples which I happened to have, and sent them off to a friend of mine. Now, this friend of mine doesn't know what's in the package. But, should he hear about me being killed in the line of duty, or maybe," she gestured in mock surprise, "just turning up missing? He's gonna send that package on to the RCMP forensics folks." Her voice and her face hardened. "I expect you might have time to get a few folks out of here before the guys in the white lab coats arrive. Still, they'll have enough to blow your secret sky high." She sighed, and rubbed her eyes tiredly.

"What makes you think we can't get your 'friend's' location out of you?" The Enforcer who had spoken earlier was suddenly right in front of her. "We've had centuries of experience." He reached out, and traced her cheek with a cold, taloned hand. Her eyes came up to meet his, unafraid.

"Give it your best shot, sport."

"It won't be worth your trouble," LaCroix interceded. "The lady is a resistor, you know."

"Hmmp. Of course. And I suppose you believe her story about a little box of evidence, LaCroix?" He looked over at LaCroix, ignoring the younger vampire completely.

"It's possible. Even probable. The question is, can *you* afford not to?" LaCroix leaned casually against the bar, a portrait of indifference. Nick, however, could see the tension his old master was attempting to hide. There was a moment of silence as the Enforcer William exchanged looks with his companions. Finally, they reached a decision. He leaned forward, and caressed Samantha's cheek again.

"You know my name. Well, know this as well. We will be watching you. And someday," he brushed one finger across her lips, "someday, we will return. In the mean time," he stepped back, and adjusted his greatcoat, "pleasant dreams." There was a gust of cold air, and the three of them were alone in the room once more.

Samantha shuddered, and swayed on her feet. This time it was Nick who caught her, and guided her gently to a seat. "Thanks, Nick. You know, I don't normally do this sort of thing. Fainting, I mean. 'S kind of embarrassing..." She sighed, and closed her eyes.

Natalie had indeed been relieved to hear from him. Once she had expressed her irritation in his 'vanishing act' she also agreed to come to the Raven, where she pronounced Samantha in need of ten stitches, which she provided, and a good night's sleep, which she would also provide back at her apartment. LaCroix had courteously offered to let Nick stay the day, and Nick gratefully accepted.

"Well, I must say that it will be a relief to have this tedious business over with," LaCroix said as he poured them both a final glass for the day. "Reporters and police officers poking and prying, chasing off the trade." He took a sip, and turned to stare absently at the darkened stage.

"Mmm. The RCMP has officially closed the case. Deranged librarian Michael Ramsey kills twenty before being taken down by a cooperative effort between the RCMP and local police. Samantha will probably get a promotion out of it."

"For whatever it will mean to her. Agent Keller does not hunt for glory any more than we do. An extraordinary woman, Nicolas."

"You sound as if you admire her, LaCroix." Nick grinned, and looked out of the corner of his eye at his old...friend?

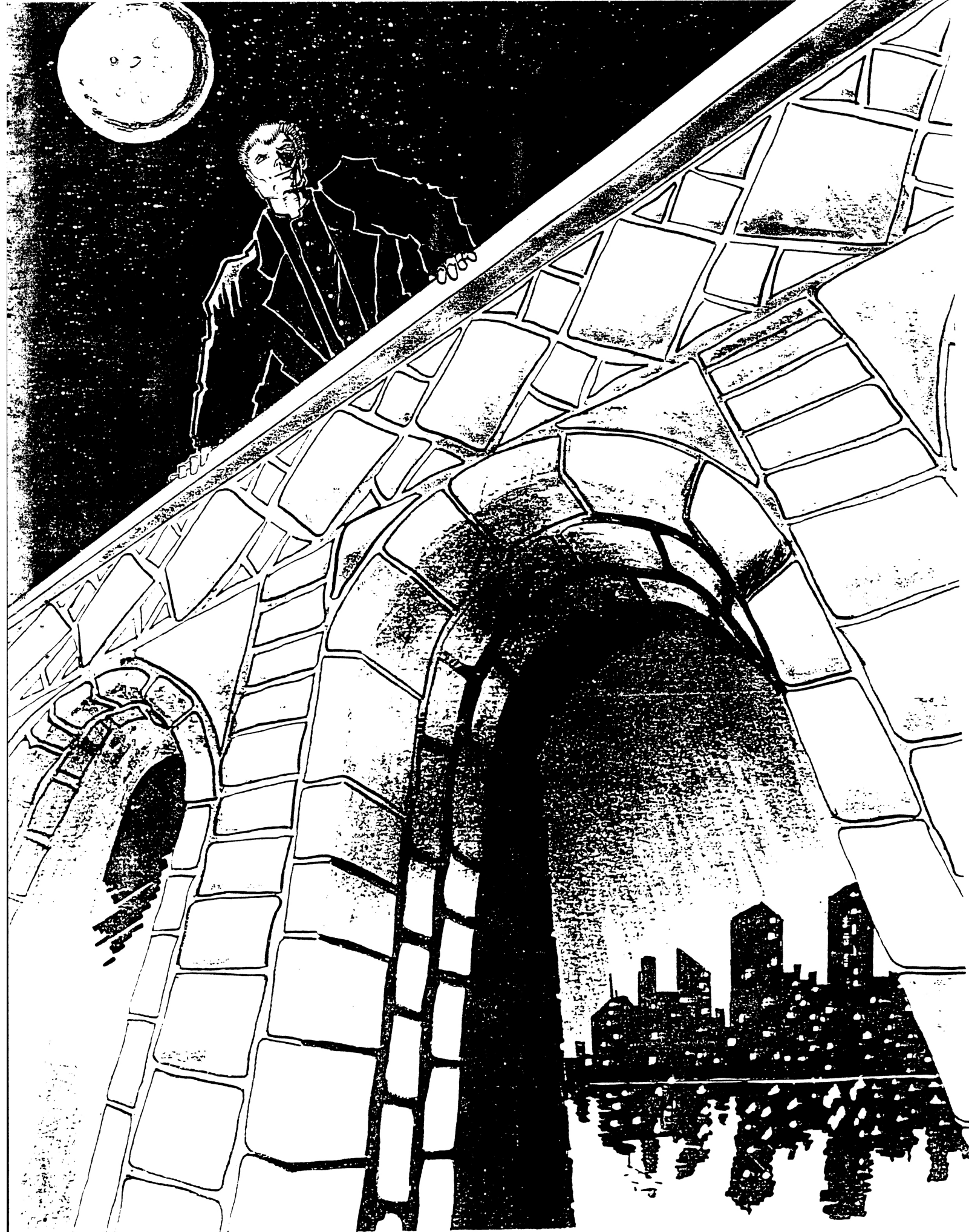
"Please do not attempt to include me in your fascination with mortals, Nicolas. I assure you, my interest in this *mortal* goes only as far as the respect of one hunter for another. Now," he set his glass

down on the bar, "I am going to bed. If you must indulge this repulsive fascination, might I suggest the television soap operas? I'm quite sure that they will provide you with all of the love and angst that you require." With that he swept out toward Janette's old rooms, where he intended to spend the remains of the day.

Nick grinned. It wasn't often that he was able to jab his old mentor so effectively. Perhaps he had hit closer to the mark than he'd realized? Nick shook his head and set his own glass down firmly. The idea was simply too strange. Definitely time to get some sleep. Nick shut off the overhead lights as he headed for the private room and its inviting couch.

As the room's door shut, a chill draft passed over the bar, a legacy of a window not properly sealed. After that, silence, save for the slow dripping of a faucet somewhere in the darkness.

THE END



Hunters of the Knight

By Misty Pendragon and Yvette Ciancio

Thomas Maverick was ready to leave when he received a frantic call from his partner, Derek. He was worried; he had witnessed a vampire kill someone, and feared that it would track him down. He needed his help. As Maverick tried to calm him, he suddenly heard the sound of shattering glass and the terrified scream of his ambushed partner, Maverick dropped the phone immediately and rushed down the hall to Derek's apartment. He kicked open the door and ran in to find nothing but a broken balcony window and a few overturned pieces of furniture.

Derek was gone.

Maverick cursed himself for his stupidity. He shook his head solemnly, raking his hand through his graying hair and pulling it out slowly as he took a cleansing breath. "I've lost another one", he lamented. "I will not let this happen again. I will take care of this, once and for all!" he vowed through clenched teeth, and silently strode out of his former partner's dwelling.

It was another typical night at the precinct; the same prostitutes being brought in, Schanke complaining about Myra, the Captain being in a bad mood. For the first time in his career, Nick was bored. If it weren't for the phone call, he might have actually gotten some sleep.

A body had been found in a alley around eleven with symptoms all too familiar to Nick: two marks at the neck, and the body drained of blood. Nick shook his head worriedly as he watched a patrol leave the precinct to investigate. *Not again*, he thought, *the victim was just a child. It has to be Lacroix*. Nick knew what he had to do and who he had to see.

Janette.

He decided that there was no reason for him to remain at his desk; Schanke could handle the processing of the lycra-clad call girls. It might even get his mind off Myra for a while, he mused. There was about six hours before sunrise, so he knew Janette would still be available.

As Lacroix lingered down the abandoned alley, he was overcome with a sense of accomplishment. He had succeeded in finding someone new to teach and nurture, a boy that would appreciate what he was and understand the glory of being immortal, much unlike that whining mortal-lover, Nicholas. He wanted Derek by his side when he and the Enforcers brought down the hinted Thomas Maverick. Derek had been the faithful assistant, sacrificing much of his childhood for a cause he couldn't fully comprehend at first. With Derek's help, they would finally be rid of the last hunter. Lacroix knew that Derek's knowledge of Maverick's tactics and habits would be useful.

He figured that a boy robbed of his childhood would want to avenge himself against the person who took it without any consideration towards the boy.

He had taken Derek from his apartment, making an uncharacteristic scene, for he knew that Derek was contacting his mentor, babbling on about being stalked by a vampire. Lacroix smirked at the irony; he had indeed been stalking the boy, and it was pure coincidence that the boy's fears played right into Lacroix's hands. He took the boy to an alley, and despite the fierce struggle, brought the boy across. If it weren't for a car passing by spotting him holding Derek's lifeless body, he would have been able to take Derek back to his loft and be there for him when he opened his newly-immortal eyes. The car stopped, though, and the driver and passenger raced out to spot what they thought to be a crime in progress. He had no choice but to depart the scene, and return for Derek later.

He returned to the alley to find Derek gone, the spot where he lay cordoned off by plastic police tape. Lacroix knew where he would be, and he knew who would be getting the shock of her life.

The body arrived at the morgue for Dr. Natalie Lambert, waiting more than patiently for her to begin her routine. The still body bag posed no threat to her; she dealt with tons of them a day. She stretched on a pair of gloves and unzipped the bag slowly. She pulled back the stiff plastic to reveal a child, no, a teenager with marks at his neck that she had seen numerous times before. The angelic face was untouched and peaceful, until the eyelids suddenly popped open revealing and otherworldly greenish color and the previously deceased body sat up.

"Oh, my God, not again!" Natalie screamed. She backed away as the boy with the angelic face growled and bared a perfect pair of gleaming white fangs, eyeing her as if she were the last caribou in Ethiopia. *This one isn't as friendly as the last one I dealt with*, she thought, remembering her very first encounter with Nick. As she banged into a gurney, the vampire boy scrambled out of the bag and jumped onto the floor. Natalie knew that it would probably be a good time to run.

She ran, slamming doors behind her, only to hear them being kicked back open. She tried to think of places to hide; she very well couldn't run upstairs and say "Help, There's a vampire after me!" Her mind focused on the layout of the morgue, and an idea popped into her panicked mind: the cold storage room, where the bodies were. She hoped that if he followed her there, he would realize that it held nothing of interest to him. Vampires hated dead people.

Natalie quickly pulled out one of the empty drawers and hopped onto the extremely cold slate. She grabbed onto the inside top of the drawer's opening and pulled the drawer in, leaving it open a few inches, or else she would be locked inside until one of her associates would open the drawer to place a body in it, only to find it already occupied.

She waited nervously, warming her face with the steam from her breath, until she heard the door bang against the wall. *Don't let him find me, please don't let him look in here*, she begged silently. A few more tense moments passed, and Natalie heard a low growl approaching. Her heart was beating a million times a minute; she couldn't help it. *He hears my heart*, she thought and began to shake, a combination of fear and the biting cold.

Just as the growling was nearing the drawer, it stopped, and Natalie heard footsteps running out of the room. She wanted to wait, thinking that he could be trying to trick her, but she couldn't take the cold anymore. She forced her frozen fingertips through the open crack, and pushed with all her strength. The air, warmer only by a few degrees, greeted her in a rush of steam produced by her labored breathing. *Another minute in there*, she thought, sitting up, and I really would have been dead. *At least I would have been in the right place.*

Nick walked casually into the Raven, Janette's place and a kind of sanctuary for vampires. As usual, she was very happy to see him.

"Janette, Lacroix is up to his old tricks," Nick said bluntly, even before he approached the dark-haired proprietess, who stood behind the bar next to a pale bartender cleaning glasses.

"Yes, I've been meaning to talk to you about that, but I haven't seen much of you lately. Nicola," Janette said, smoothly wanting to make Nick feel a little bit guilty. She placed a kiss on his cheek as he sat on a stool in front of her. The bartender placed a glass filled with a deep crimson liquid in front of him. Nick waved it away immediately. Janette took it from him, and began to dip her finger into the liquid, pulling it out seductively licking her finger dry. Nick tried his best to ignore her and stick to the matter at hand. "He's attacked someone in an attempt to bring him across. No doubt he's wanting a new companion. We can't let the Enforcers get wind of it."

"Maybe they should get wind of it" Janette said. "We can't have him polluting the street with his little whelps. If he has gone and brought someone across, someone should stop him."

"Someone like me?" Nick lilted.

"Well, now that you mention it..."

He took her hand and kissed the outside of her palm. "Good night Janette".

Maverick wanted to start to prepare for the next hunt, but since he had no idea where to start, he thought it a waste of time. He was still inconsolable over the loss of Derek, but he knew that it was a hazard of the job; that someday, something like that could happen.

As he prepared for bed, he decided that he'd go to the police department on the morning, fill out a fake missing persons report, then try to track someone down in the morgue. It was a long shot, but he had to go on. He reached into his bag that he always kept by his bedside, and pulled out a string of garlic heads. He placed it in his nighttable for protection; it had always worked for him. He only wished it had worked for Derek.

As Nick looked out into the night, he sensed another vampire presence out there, watching him, waiting for him. He wanted to remain there to get a better feel for the presence and where it could have been emanating from. Instead, he felt the fear of someone close to him, the panicked heartbeats of someone in terrible trouble.

Natalie.

He took to the sky, and within seconds, entered the morgue unnoticed. He found Natalie sitting on a cold slab in her freezer room swinging her feet over the side. She looked frazzled, but unharmed.

"Nat, are you okay?" He questioned in a concerned tone. "What happened?"

"Nick, I saw another vampire," She said, her voice shaking as well as her body. "He did the same thing to me as you did, and he g-got up from the examining t-t-t-table and chased me." She rubbed her cold hands along her colder arms in a feeble attempt to warm herself. Nick whipped off his trenchcoat and wrapped it around her, steadying her as she pushed herself off the drawer.

"What did he look like?"

Natalie grabbed the lapels of Nick's coat and tried to bring it up to her forehead, anything to get warm. "He was young, m-m-maybe seventeen, eighteen. tops."

It was the DOA from earlier; Nick tried to work a timeframe in his mind as to how long it would take for a body to be drained of blood, and then reanimate with the soul, or lack thereof, of a vampire. A young boy, a quick transition period - this definitely smelled of Lacroix.

"D-d-do you know who did this, Nick?" Natalie asked.

Nick paused. "I can't say for sure but I think I have an idea."

Waking inside a body bag was not something Derek had ever planned to do, so when he found himself in the morgue, he was naturally worried. It didn't take him long to figure out why he was there, and what had happened to him; once he opened his eyes and saw the woman there, he knew what he was: a vampire. The instantaneous feeling of hunger pulsed through him; he had never wanted anything so badly in his life as to tear open the veins in her neck and drink, but she managed to get away from him. He didn't want to waste time chasing her down; the immortal part of him needed to be nourished, soon. He fled, hoping to find easier prey. Everything looked and felt so different; it was as if he had been encased in a glass dome, observing things and remaining safe. Now the dome had been lifted, and he was free to experience what he had been shielded from.

Derek's mother emerged from his room, holding a small suitcase. She handed it to Maverick, and gave Derek a hug that almost squeezed the air out of him.

"Mommy," he whined, "I don't want to go!"

"You go with the man, he'll take good care of you," she told him, wiping her eyes with her wrist. "You stay for a while, and he'll bring you back."

"Promise?"

His mother nodded. "Yes. Promise. Now off with you."

Derek's father never said good-bye; he was too busy with whatever he was doing at the table. Derek didn't really care. He took Maverick's hand, and left his childhood home forever.

Maverick was right: they did see places no one else did. Or would want to for that matter. Derek soon learned what he was expected of him, and when he encountered his first vampire, he realized why he was picked. These were the things from his nightmares. Maverick chose him because he had seen these things in his dreams. But how did Maverick know about his dreams? Could he read his mind? Derek never questioned this; he accepted it as if it were meant to be.

Derek had become the very thing that he and Maverick hunted. All of Maverick teaching were still intact, but he was on the other side of the door, and Maverick was wrong; being a vampire wasn't so bad. In fact, he could very well adjust to being immortal.

The one thing he wanted to do, more than anything, was to be with a woman. *Hell, why stop at one?* he thought with confidence. *I can have as many as I want.* The only thing that differentiated him from a normal young man seeking companionship was that some of the women might end up as dinner. He had no choice; he had to feed. Not every one he fed on needed to die; he had seen many who had been drained to the point of death, but left alive with no memory of the attack. Derek could rely on his vast knowledge of the ways and practices of vampires to keep himself content.

As he strolled through the crowd of gothic-attired patrons who swayed to the ear-splitting music, he spotted the most exquisite woman he had ever seen; a flame-haired beauty with sapphire eyes and ivory skin. The black crunched velvet dress she wore proudly displayed her ample assets, and she sat alone at the bar, sipping something out of a tall, thin glass.

He had to have her. He would not leave the Raven without her.

Derek smoothed his blond hair with his hand, hoping that it looked alright, no more mirrors for him. The woman scanned the room and finally set her gaze upon Derek. Their eyes locked. He immediately sensed that she was mortal, probably one of those vampire lovers Maverick told him about, the ones who pretend to be what they would not ever wish to become. Derek decided that she would be his first, and he would bring her across to spend eternity together.

Nick returned to the Raven, knowing full well that all the vampires, even the new ones, ended up there at some point during the night. Upon entering, he spotted him; he resembled Lacroix, with the blond hair and intense look, but was much younger with sharper features. He was walking out with a red-haired woman in tow. She was a mortal, and Nick knew how it would end, how it always ended.

The cop part of him wanted to follow, but the vampire part knew of the hunger. As a cop, there was nothing he could do, but as a vampire, he could give him a warning. Nick briefly thought about that, then began thinking of the repercussions that would have, mainly the wraith of Lacroix. The elder vampire hadn't paid Nick a visit in a long time, and Nick was getting very accustomed to the peace and quiet. He reluctantly decided that he would keep a watchful eye on him, but stay out of the way.

When he left the morgue, instinct made him take to the sky. The fear of being caught gave him the impetus to fly, and Derek could not believe the feeling. The chilled air gusted by him as he watched buildings fly by, the cars and people below mere specks from his point of view. *This is incredible!* he thought joyously. He had seen other vampires fly, but never thought it would feel so wonderful. He flew for nearly an hour before he began to feel small, sharp pains. He knew what his body was telling him, so he eased himself down in search for food.

He paid a visit to the Raven, the bar that served as a vampire refuge. Maverick had made mention of it on more than one occasion, but had never taken Derek there personally. While under Maverick's tutelage, he wasn't permitted to do the normal things boys could do; he never rode a bike, he never was allowed to date - all because he was chosen to succeed Maverick as a vampire hunter.

His parents, the uncaring parasites they were, had sold him to Maverick as a slave. Being only ten, he couldn't understand why Mommy and Daddy were giving him to this man, who was, at first, very frightening. He had a wicked look in his eyes, just like the weird people he would see in his bad dreams, though he didn't have pointy teeth. On the other hand, his parents weren't treating him very nice anymore; Daddy drank and yelled a lot mostly at his mother, but sometimes at both of them. Then he would start to hit both of them. His mother was passive accepting the punishment that was doled onto her night after night. When his father left for work on the mornings that his hangovers weren't too bad, his mother would try to act as if nothing had happened, piling layers of makeup on the bruises that marked her face like a piece of damaged fruit. She would walk him to school, holding his hand, humming softly and letting Derek try to identify the song. Soon, she changed, also; she started to yell at him just as much as his father did, and she started to smell like him, too. Sometimes, she wouldn't wake up to take him to school, so he was late a lot. When she did take him, she would walk with him in her nightgown, with a flimsy bathrobe her only cover. No makeup to hide her face, no more songs. It was then that Derek realized that something had to happen, either to them, or to him.

The day that Maverick came to their house, Derek was off in his room, building a house with a old set of Lincoln Logs; he didn't have any long logs left, so his house had big windows. He heard someone come in, and began talking to his parents. He didn't want to listen in on what they were saying; too many people came to the house, and when they left, his parents would start yelling at each other. Soon, he was called out to the living room. The man who wore a long, black coat stood behind the couch as his mother calmly told Derek that he was going to stay with the man for a while, that he was going to show him things that no other boys could do. Derek turned to his father, who was seated at the kitchen table counting something. His mother excused herself to begin packing Derek's clothes and Maverick took a few steps toward Derek, very slowly as not to scare him. Derek was too stunned to move; he didn't know what to say.

Maverick crouched down to come face to face with Derek. "Hello, Derek," he said sounding like Mr. Rogers. "My name is Thomas Maverick. You can call me Maverick."

Derek was overcome with the desire to run, but he was more afraid of what his parents would do to him than this man. He remained silent.

"I know you're probably wondering why I've come for you," Maverick continued, his voice steady. "I've come to take you from this and show you things you've never imagined before. We're going to go to places far from here, see things only special people are allowed to see." He moved a few inches closer to Derek, and whispered into his ear, "Places where people don't hit little children."

Nick looked for Janette, who wasn't hard to find; she had changed her dress from a few hours ago. Her new frock was almost as ostentatious as the last, but there was only so much that can be done with black lace. She spotted Nick, and slinked over to him planting her usual kiss on his cheek.

"Twice in one night, Nicola. I'm not sure if I should be happy or concerned," she purred.

"Did you see that blond boy? He left with a red-haired girl."

Janette registered his question with a studious glare. "Yes?"

"He's Lacroix's newest initiate"

Janette sighed. "I thought so. He gave me that same sick chill that Lacroix used to give me. Why he would want to make a protégé now is beyond me. He hasn't had much luck with keeping his students in line." she said with a wink.

Nick ignored her intentional reference. "Any protégé of Lacroix's should be watched over carefully, as you should know firsthand yourself." he retorted.

"Touché, Nicola," Janette said, flashing a whimsical smile. "As for keeping an eye on that one, I think I'll pass. I don't want to involve myself with Lacroix any more than I have to. In fact, I would rather forget the whole thing."

"Even if it leads to a murder?"

"You saw the girl yourself. Did she look as though she was being pulled? Did she resist? Nick, let the boy have a snack," she pleaded half-heartedly. "He knows the rules."

Nick frowned. "Knowing them and following are two different things. If he's new, he might want to test his limits. He might lose control."

"So you're going to follow him, am I right?"

Nick smiled mischievously, and left.

"Don't be surprised if he's not happy to see you," Janette called out to him. She shook her head as he disappeared from the Raven. "I know I wouldn't be."

Derek sat in the passenger seat of Kathy's car. Upon leaving the Raven, she asked him if he would care to go to her apartment. He didn't object. Derek was happy that she was so forward; it made his job much easier. He did want to try out the powers of persuasion vampires possessed, but Kathy was so damn obliging, he didn't need to. He couldn't wait to get to her place; the hunger inside was driving him mad, and taking all of his will power not to make her stop the car and take her on the side of the road.

A few minutes later, they reached Kathy's apartment. She parked her car in front of the building, and Derek bounded out first, running to the other side to open her door. She blushed at his act of chivalry. "Not many guys I date do that," she commented, stepping out and taking Derek's hand.

"I'm different from other guys," Derek said with honesty.

They entered her apartment, a modest place filled with a framed poster of sunflowers, lace curtains, and a small collection of teddy bears that were situated against the pillows on her chenille bedspread. Derek was a bit taken aback at the surroundings; everything was so cutesy-wutesy, not what he expected. He really didn't know what to expect, but teddy bears certainly were not part of the mental picture.

Kathy closed the door and threw her keys down on the small table by the door. She turned to Derek with a look that screamed "I'm ready". Derek had been more than ready for close to an hour. He took three steps toward her, wrapped his arms around her and kissed her hard. She was only the second person he had kissed in his entire life; the first was a girl in Budapest crush on him when he was thirteen. He didn't like it then, but he was enjoying this now.

Kathy's hands roamed his body, pulling his shirt from his pants, nearly pulling it over his head. Her tongue had pushed past his lips and was exploring his mouth. His fangs had not lowered, although it wouldn't be long before they did. He tore his lips from hers, and just gazed at her, enraptured by her beauty. Slowly, his hands moved along her shoulders to the inside of her dress. He gently pulled the dress off, letting it slide off her lithe figure. She was bare underneath. Kathy's chest was heaving with anticipation; she wanted him to do something, anything.

Although Derek was enjoying this, the hunger nagged at him like a glass shard wedged in his throat. He had to feed.

Now.

He began kissing her throat, causing Kathy to make soft moaning sounds. Her hard nipples felt like marbles on his chest. "Oh, God, Derek," she begged. "Do it. Do it now!"

There it was. He had her permission.

He lifted his head and let the fangs lower, ready to pierce the delicate vein that lay beneath the thin veil of skin. With one hand at the small of her back and the other behind her head, he plunged his fangs into her neck and drank deeply.

The ecstasy that flowed through his mouth in the form of hot, sanguine sustenance was more intoxicating than any sexual dalliance that he could, or would, ever encounter. As every drop of Kathy's blood became his, he felt the overdriving need to have more. He could feel her body writhe in his tight grip her heartbeat tripling as it fought against the sudden extraction of the life-giving liquid. She did not matter anymore; the only thing that mattered was his thirst, and it was not yet quenched. He drank until he felt nothing more come from her vein - she was completely dry.

And completely dead.

Derek released his grip, and Kathy's drained body fell to the floor with a soft thump. He breathed heavily and wiped his lips with his wrist. A faint smudge of blood stained it, and he feverishly licked it.

He felt sated.

Powerful.

And sad.

He glanced down at Kathy, whose bloodless body lay at his feet. She was to be like him, to be at his side for all time. But he realized that he took too much, he went too far. In the mad haze of hunger, Derek quickly forgot that restraint was the most important thing to remember. But he couldn't help himself. Because of it, Kathy was gone.

Derek let out a raging yell that echoed through the apartment. "This can't happen!" he screamed. "I wanted her so badly!" He didn't mean to end her life without enjoying her company first. He scooped her into his arms and lifted her off the floor, unbounded tears streaming from the corners of his eyes. He had to get rid of her body, but how?

He carried her over to the bed, laying her on the crisp white bedspread. He threw the bears off, and wrapped it around her like a shroud. He threw her over his shoulder and exited the apartment taking her keys on the way out.

Derek drove quickly to the riverbank; dawn was less than an hour away. he took Kathy's body from the trunk and threw it into the river. It sank under the murky water with a splash then bobbed back to the surface for a tense minute before being claimed by the river's depths and disappearing.

A tinge of remorse feathered the inside of Derek's chest as he came to the stark realization of what he had done. For a whole decade, he helped Maverick avoid the very act he had just taken part of. He had killed viciously, selfishly, and surprisingly, wasn't too upset. The feeling of remorse was slowly being replaced by a sense of right; he needed her blood, and she willingly gave it, whether she knew it or not. It felt so good, too; Kathy's blood soothed the pain of his starved veins, quenched the fierce hunger and fully energized him.

Derek found that he was still hungry, even after draining Kathy. He wanted to search for another compliant woman, but the sun was due to rise in less than an hour. He had to find somewhere to sleep, somewhere dark and secluded. He scanned the waters one last time, making sure that the body wasn't going to surface again. After the final check, he blew a kiss to Kathy in her watery grave. "Good-bye, Kathy," he said, walking away. "Thanks for dinner." Derek took to the air and was gone.

Nick stood behind a pier about a hundred feet away. *Apparently, he thought, this one's senses have not fully developed, or he would have known I was here* He witnessed the disposal of the fledgling's victim, and would call it in right before he ended his shift and returned home. That would give investigators time to document the crime, and also give Natalie the opportunity to do an autopsy, although the cause of death would be obvious to her. He would have to call her and assure her that the body was not going to rise up like the last one did. Nick also wanted to let her know that if anyone came asking about this boy, be it a relative or friend, that she should lead them away from revealing what really happened. She was a very good actress when she put her mind to it.

Natalie finished the autopsy on the young female that she brought in during the early morning. Thankfully, Nick warned her what to expect. The woman, one Katherine Andrews, was completely drained of blood, but for her sake, she listed the cause of death as accidental drowning. The fact that her car was parked at the crime scene would give her reason to suspect suicide, and she would've done so, if it weren't for those marks on her neck. Nick told her what he witnessed; Natalie's would be attacker decided to search for some take-out, and when he had his fill, he dumped her in the river.

She asked one of her attendants to return the body to the cold storage room as she took off her smock and draped it over the swivel chair at her desk. She sipped at her coffee, which was still slightly warm from before the autopsy. A knock at her door startled her, and she turned to see a man standing at the door. He looked to be around 40, possibly older, with long grayish hair and deep, blue eyes. He was tall and wore a long trenchcoat that brushed the tips of his leather boots. *So this is what Lorenzo Lamas will look like in a few years*, she thought. "Can I help you?"

"My name is Thomas Maverick," he said extending his hand as he entered. "I'm looking for my nephew. I filled out a missing person's report, and the lieutenant upstairs told me to stop down here, that you've had some recent ...additions."

Natalie's sensors went bonkers. *This is the guy Nick warned me about*, she told herself. *I'd better be convincing.*

"Well, Mr. Maverick," she started, placing her mug on the desk to shake his hand, "the only recent addition I've had is a woman who threw herself into the river. She'd have to be your niece."

"Have you had any male corpses come through here in the past day or so?"

What, besides the one that chased me through my own morgue and tried to freeze me to death? "No, I'm sorry. Not since last week." she cleared her throat and leaned against her desk. "It seems that you're not too optimistic about your nephew. I don't get many visitors down here; people who do come here are usually expected to identify someone. They don't come here asking, have you seen my son?, or something like that." She narrowed her eyes and wondered what he was really after. "Have you checked the hospitals?"

Maverick nodded. "Yes, it was the first thing I did."

"Then what makes you so sure that he's dead?"

"My nephew and I were." Maverick stopped and corrected himself. "are very close. He's been with me ever since his parents died. We have this...connection. I guess. I just have a bad feeling that he's in grave danger."

"I take it the pun wasn't intentional," Natalie joked.

Maverick didn't flinch.

"Sorry, just a little morgue humor." *Nice going, Lambert*, she chided. "Well, I don't think I can be of much help, Mr. Maverick. The only thing I would suggest is to keep close to your phone, in case the police find anything. Maybe your nephew's going through a rough time with something, and wants to be by himself for a while."

"If there was something bothering him," Maverick said, trying to sound like the grieving relative, "I think I would be the first to know."

"Kids these days are hard to figure out, especially young ones, you know, nineteen, twenty. They think they can handle anything, and when things go slightly wrong, they do what they think is best." Natalie tried to sound like one of those phone-in psychiatrists she would sometimes tune into late at night, just to hear other people's problems that made her problems sound terribly dull. "Most of the times that's the worst thing they could do."

"How did you know how old my nephew was?" Maverick asked slowly. "I don't remember mentioning his age."

Uh-oh. "I..just assumed that he would be around that age. That's the age when problems like these start. I've seen plenty of young men through here who can't handle their problems and take the easy way out."

She was lying, Maverick sensed. He was sure of it. He also knew that there was no other information that she could, or would, tell him. "Yes, well I'm positive my nephew didn't kill himself." he shook her hand again. "I do thank you for your time."

"No problem," Natalie replied. "I hope you find him before I do."

Maverick smiled. "I'm pretty sure I will."

The noonday sun kept Maverick's quarry at bay, and enabled him to stock up on much needed supplies. He would hunt tonight; his contact had given him a tip, advising him to go to the Raven. Maverick knew the place very well, and hoped that there was no one there who would remember his last visit. It was a nesting ground for vampires, and he hoped he would find Derek there.

For the next few hours, Maverick gathered his supplies; picking up some holy water at the local church, stopping at a hardware store, and walking through a wooded area on the town's outskirts, picking up pieces of wood he would be able to carve into deadly stakes. With his tasks completed, he returned home and began to prepare for the night's hunt.

When Derek opened his eyes, he was disoriented; he had no idea where he was, or how he had gotten there. He was lying down inside something, and a stream of light shafted through a crack, making him squint. Thankfully, it wasn't sunlight.

A coffin. I'm in a coffin, he concluded. *But how did I get here?*

He pushed the lid open and sat up, his bones creaking and snapping with the sudden movement. His surroundings were straight out of a costume drama: tapestries hung loosely from the ceilings, covering large patches of bare walls; ornate candelabras sat upon antique tables or stood on their own in corners, the candlelight blanketing the room with a soft, relaxing glow; furniture in bold patterns filled the room, and in a far corner stood a marble podium with the Grecian bust of a young girl, prominently displayed with the proper lighting. Who could have brought him here?

"Is there something troubling you, Derek?" a silken voice asked.

Derek turned his head to see a man saunter like a stalking cat into the windowless room, clad in a black suit with a high collar. It almost looked as if he were gliding. "N-n-no," Derek stammered. "Nothing's wrong."

Lacroix came to Derek, and helped him out of the coffin. "I can sense that you have many questions. Let's start off with the most obvious: my name is Lacroix, and I am the one responsible for your current state of being."

"You made me a vampire?" Derek asked, his voice rising. "Why?"

"I've known of you for some time," Lacroix said. "I've also known how unhappy you've been. I thought that bringing you across would open your eyes to all you've been missing."

"What gave you the right to decide that for me?"

Lacroix shrugged. "I thought I was doing you a favor. It's not as if other people haven't made decisions for you before." He walked to the coffin and extended one hand. Derek took his hand, and used it to steady himself as he rose from the coffin. "You slept well, I take it."

Derek nodded as his wobbly legs made contact with the floor and reached to take the glass. "Yes. Like the-" He stopped the sentence short.

"Good." Lacroix brushed off Derek's shoulders and smoothed out the wrinkles in his jacket. "I will supply you with some new clothing for your next venture. And I offer my home to you; you are free to come and go as you please. I ask for nothing in return just yet, but you do have knowledge that I may have use for. Now, before you go out, I want to know about last night. You fed well, yes?"

Derek smiled sheepishly. He felt as if he was discussing his first date.

"I met someone at The Raven, and she invited me to her place."

"That's good," Lacroix said in a pleased tone. "Pray, continue."

"Well, we started kissing, and it was getting real hard to control myself."

Lacroix paused. "And?"

Derek stared at the floor, suddenly ashamed. "I...um...killed her."

"And you feel bad about this?"

"I didn't mean to!" Derek said, the guilt from the night before resurfacing. "I wanted her so much! She was beautiful, and I thought I could make her like me, but...but I couldn't stop. I just took everything from her until there was nothing left."

"A beginner's mistake," Lacroix reassured him. "Nothing to go on half-cocked about. The fact is you found your first meal on your own. That's extraordinary! Once you have more feedings, you'll be able to practice more, and you'll have yourself a mate before you know it."

"How do you do it?" Derek asked. "Killing, I mean."

"Dear Derek," Lacroix cooed, "Once you understand that it's a part of your life now, it will become nothing more than an afterthought. Practice, my boy. Practice makes perfect. You'll see." He patted Derek on the back like a football coach. "I want you to know something, my boy. Did anyone see you? Or did you feel anyone watching you?"

Derek was silent for a moment. "There was no one around, from what I remember. And I couldn't sense anyone, at least I don't think I did."

"That's all right," Lacroix said. "You're still young, your senses haven't fully awakened just yet. But they will. Be patient."

"Now I bet that you're starving. You'll find that one meal won't be enough. And a word of advice: it's not necessary to have one big meal; snacks are the key. Little snacks here and there will be more than sufficient for you, at least until your body gets used to the change. When it does," Lacroix spread his arms out wide "The world will be a smorgasbord."

Nick checked the day's messages as he drank his supplement. There were no phone calls that demanded his immediate attention. One call that did interest him came in close to lunchtime. He had a good idea who the caller would be.

"Hey, Nick, it's Nat. Boy, were you right about someone coming to look for that kid. It was weird; he said he was looking for his nephew. I could see through him like he was a glass plate. Nephew, my Aunt Matilda. I almost slipped up, but I don't think he caught it. I think I covered myself pretty well. This guy was a snappy dresser, too; long coat, all black, sounds like someone I know. Anyway, his name was Thomas Maverick. I don't know if that rings a bell or anything. Oh, one more thing: I listed the Andrews girl as an accidental drowning. I couldn't put down suicide; it just wouldn't feel right. Okay, I gotta go. I'll talk to you later."

As the message ended, Nick pushed the off button and took a deep breath. The name Maverick did ring a bell. Many bells, in fact. Church bells....

....that rang far in the distance as the blackened remains of a body were found in a torch-lit clearing. Nicholas knew, by the wooden stake protruding from the abdominal region, who had found the poor soul first: Robert Maverick. England's finest vampire hunter.

Damn his contemptuous soul! Nicholas fumed. *Who has given him the right to hunt us? Why should he waste his time chasing us when he could easily capture bastards who murder for no reason and send their damnable souls to Hell!*

The reasoning of the human condition was something that Nicholas troubled himself with more often than not, driving Lacroix and Janette crazy. Time after time, he pondered what they considered to be the sustaining of the immortal ideal. He had lengthy discussions that left Lacroix frustrated and Nicholas confused. Was it possible that, after two hundred and some odd years, that he was regaining some of his mortality?

Nicholas sat back on his heels as he contemplated what to do about the remains of a fellow vampire. He gently lifted the stake from the pile of ashes and tossed it aside. There was not much he could do, except leave it there and let the elements take care of him, her, whatever.

Suddenly, Nicholas stood quickly, sensing someone nearby. He turned ever so slowly, his eyes taking on their greenish glow, fangs ready to be bared. He stared into the fire-dimmed darkness and saw nothing. Heard nothing. But sensed something.

Nicholas brushed his dusty hands on his brown breeches. Whoever, whatever, there was beyond his sight was playing a waiting game, much like he was himself. Both parties were patiently anticipating each other's next move. Nicholas knew he could end it right then and there, just lift himself into the air and close in on whatever stalked him. He hesitated, though; he was quite enjoying the hunt.

The hunt...

HUNTER!

Nicholas spun around as the snap of a crossbow crackled like lightning through the empty air. The flying arrow missed Nicholas, and as the hunter reached behind him for a fresh arrow, Nicholas swooped on top of the man, grabbed him by the neck, and slammed him up against an oak tree.

"A convenient trap, Maverick," Nicholas growled, displaying his fangs for effect.

"Pity it failed."

Robert Maverick breathed heavily in the face of the demon that wore human form, and wrestled under his grip. "I don't fear you or your demonkind," He said bravely.

Nicholas smiled, tossing his head aside. "No, I don't doubt that, else you wouldn't be trying to eradicate us every chance you get."

"You prey on the weak and defenseless, all for the unnatural purpose of draining a person's lifeblood from their body!" Maverick shouted. "Tis a travesty of nature that you should even walk the Earth!"

"Nay, Maverick," Nicholas added, "the only travesty is the one that you yourself commit. Tell me, have you ever been officially appointed as a hunter of the undead? Or was it something in the way of a career change?"

"I do this not as a career, fiend," Maverick responded, the words coming out strangled and dry, "but as a service to God and the people."

"So you want to become a politician," Nicholas eased his grip on the hunter's neck. He might actually have an interesting conversation with this one. "Or a hero, at least."

"There is no glory in this. Only the satisfaction of seeing creatures like you and your companions pay for the countless deaths you have caused." Maverick rubbed his neck as the vampire's hand released its hold.

"You know of my companions?" Nicholas arched his eyebrows in mock surprise.

"Aye, I've tracked you ever since you came to England, not too long ago."

This surprised Nicholas. "Have you, know? Then you must be very good at what you do, indeed."

"I intend to show you the full extent of my skills, vampire. It will be the last thing you ever see!" Maverick reached behind his back and pulled out a stake he had hidden underneath his jerkin. With a quick movement, he thrust it towards Nicholas, who shifted slightly and avoided the death blow to the heart. The stake pierced his shoulder, causing a yell to escape Nicholas' lips. He threw Maverick to the ground in a rage, and pulled out the stake with a swift yank, throwing it angrily to the ground.

The sudden pain produced small bits of light which formed on the inside of Nicholas' eyelids. "That was foolish, hunter," he said through clenched teeth. "Although I admire your tenacity."

Where is Miles, that fool! Maverick thought, panicked. "If you plan to kill me, I pray, make it quick."

Nicholas laughed. "Oh, I assure you, it would be quick." He gingerly touched the wound on his shoulder, which was already beginning to close by itself. "I have no intention of killing you though. Not yet."

Maverick stared at him puzzled. "I don't understand." *If he were here, I would be able to finish this here and now!*

"Nor do I," Nicholas replied. "perhaps it has something to do with the fact that I rather enjoy this little sport. It could also be that I'm just not hungry. What matters, my good man, is that I've come up with a proposition: you say you've tracked us since our arrival. That's all well and good; being the hunted instead of the hunter is quite a change. But what I offer is sanctuary, from myself and my companions, at least."

"I am not sure I follow your meaning," Maverick shifted to a more comfortable position.

"What I am saying is that if you swear to cease this pointless hunt against us, I will grant you your life. Leave us alone, and I will make sure the same is done to you."

"But what about the others?" Maverick asked incredulously. "What gives you the right to condemn your race, just for the sake of saving yourself?"

"The same sense of righteousness that made you appoint yourself sole protector of the human race." Nicholas paced around Maverick like a vulture would do to a dying animal. "I am making you work harder at your task. I have a feeling that if you persevere, you will do much harm to my race. You are strong-willed, determined and brave; qualities that we hate. Because of that, I would rather not lay eyes upon you again.

"Know this, hunter," Nicholas knelt beside Maverick, bringing his face so close to the hunter's that he could see the steady flow of blood in his pulsating vein, "if any of your kind pursue me or my companions, I will not hesitate to show you how grave a mistake you would be making. And I would do to you what you would do to what they would do."

Maverick was silent. In all the vampires he had dealt with, never had he met one with restraint, one who gave him a choice. There was a part of him who could not decide to take the offer. Could he trust this one? he questioned himself. He could not be completely sure.

"Of course," Nicholas continued, "I could forget of our deal and rip your throat out right now." He offered his hand to Maverick. It's your decision."

May the Lord forgive me, Maverick pleaded silently. "I accept your offer." he took Nicholas' hand and was pulled to his feet.

"There. That wasn't so hard, was it?" Nicholas smiled normally. "I must say, you're a lucky man to have encountered me rather than my companions. They are not as lenient with hunters."

"By what name shall I know you by?" Maverick asked. "I would want to remember your name so I can let my son know. I am training him to be a hunter like myself."

"A family line. How noble." Nicholas began to walk away, trying to decide how he was going to explain this to Lacroix and Janette. "My name is Nicholas. Do not forget it." He took to the air, leaving the hunter alone in the ring of light.

Nick downed his drink and refilled the glass to the top. He remembered Maverick--Robert Maverick, that is--all too well. He was one of the first people to see Nick for what he was becoming; something closely resembling human.

Now his offspring is looking for Lacroix's little plaything. Nick wondered what part the hunter played in this melodrama, and why it was imperative that he find the boy. He didn't want to pay Lacroix a visit; he'd surely think that Nick would be there to arrest his protégé. The new ones were always unpredictable, and Nick didn't want to incense him by angering Lacroix, however easy that was.

He had two choices; find the boy, or find the hunter. Nick had a bad feeling that he would fail in both missions, and that the boy and the hunter would find each other. Nick knew that such a meeting would end only one way.

Someone would die.

Maverick briefly considered stopping by the Raven, knowing that there was a good chance he would find Derek there, but the thought of possibly being recognized by someone was a powerful deterrent. No, he would start walking the streets, using his keen sense of insight that was sharply honed through years of use. He had a feeling that he would find Derek tonight, and that he would have to be prepared to possibly end his companion's life.



It was an hour after sundown, and Maverick left a downtown luncheonette after a quick meal, heaving the worn knapsack over his shoulder and throwing a few dollars onto the beige Formica counter. He walked briskly out of the eatery, head held high and back pole straight to counter the weight of the knapsack. All eyes were upon him as he left; he was used to being stared at. It was one of the job's downsides; having people gawk and whisper, wondering if he were a criminal on the run, or if they had seen his face on a TV show depicting wanted men. He didn't care. There were times when Maverick wanted to drop his knapsack and tell the people what he did, show them the stakes and the assortment of crosses, explain the existence of vampires and how they were real and walked among them every night without them even knowing it. Maverick wished that the truth was easy to convey, and that the people would believe it so easily, as it was for his ancestors. Times were different, though; people weren't as gullible and afraid as they were when his forebears lived and first began hunting vampires. He knew that if he spoke openly about vampires, he would be locked inside the deepest cell of the nearest asylum for a long time. It had happened to his grandfather. His father, who was only fifteen, had to teach himself using his father's notes. His inexperience cost many lives at first, but as every Maverick did, he grew into his job and taught his son. Derek was the closest thing he had to a son, and the pain of losing him was silently tearing at his soul.

The sky had turned a deep blue, it would be black in another half an hour. Maverick strolled the streets slowly, gazing at each person passing by, his hands close to his coat pockets, where he conveniently stashed stakes and vials of holy water.

It was nearly ten when Maverick decided to rest. He had come to a park with a small lake. People walked their dogs and joggers did their last mile as Maverick sat on a stone bench beside a forsythia bush. Sighing deeply, he ran his hand through his long hair. *Maybe I should end the fight and try to live normally. There's nothing I can do for Derek.*

Maverick bowed his head in despair. He had never felt like this; spent and lacking the drive that had kept his family line going for close to three hundred years. He was the last hunter, and maybe it was time to end the family business once and for all.

He heard footsteps approach him, but didn't raise his head right away. When the footsteps stopped in front of him, he lifted his head and saw a man stand over him. Somehow, he looked familiar.

"Thomas Maverick?"

Maverick blinked. "Yes?"

"I'm Detective Knight, Metro Homicide." Nick reached for his badge inside his coat.

A tidal wave of recognition washed over Maverick. This man indeed looked familiar. There was a drawing of this man in one of his ancestors' journals. A deal was made between him and the previous Maverick that granted them both their lives as long as they didn't cross each other. The journal stated that this man and his two companions were to be left alone, or they would renege their pact and destroy the hunters.

"You're one of them," Maverick said in a hushed tone.

Nick pocketed his badge. "In a technical sense, yes. I'm still a vampire. You've been studying the journals of your relatives."

"My ancestor drew your picture in his journal, right after his encounter with you. He's been a legend in our family: the one who made a deal with a vampire,"

Nick laughed. "I would have thought he'd be thrown out of the hunter's guild for what he did."

Maverick stood, staring at Nick as though he had seen a statue come to life. "You've managed to live all those years."

"Well, sure. I didn't have you on my back, following me all over the world."

"Still, it's quite remarkable that you've lasted so long. None of my ancestors have come across you since that initial meeting so long ago." Maverick suddenly felt humbled. "You must be very good at what you do."

"I don't do what I used to do, and I think your ancestor had something to do with that," Nick confessed. "When I let him go, I felt as if I did something right. I didn't do what I should have done; instead of taking his life, I gave it back to him. It was a turning point for me. Since then, I've felt that I should be giving back what I took for all those years before."

Maverick was astonished by what he heard. "A vampire with a soul," he breathed.

"No, just a guilty conscience." Nick looked around, the park was almost empty. He turned to Maverick, ready to confirm the hunter's fears about the boy, although he knew that the news would not be unexpected. "I know about your partner."

Maverick faced Nick. "Have you seen Derek?"

"Yes." Nick paused. "He's been brought across, and he's made his first kill."

"I thought as much." Maverick shook his head solemnly. "I have to end it."

"I know." Nick could see the torment in Maverick's eyes, the look he had seen many times when he had to inform someone that a loved one was dead. It was a look of pain, disbelief, and usually led to an outpouring of tears and emotion. Maverick held himself together; no tears, no wall of grief. Nick knew that Maverick could not afford to get emotional, not when the most agonizing task he would ever face was still at hand.

"I don't suppose you know where to find him?"

"I think it's best that he finds you," Nick said. "If you go searching for him, you might find yourself facing more than you're able to take on."

"Are you saying that I can't do my job?" Maverick grew angry and frustrated. "May I remind you how many of your kind I've killed over the years?"

"With a companion at your side," Nick added. "You're alone now."

"That doesn't mean I'm incapable of handling it myself!"

"Listen," Nick said forcefully, attempting to calm Maverick down, "We shouldn't be arguing about it."

"You're right. Just tell me where he is."

Nick sighed. There seemed to be no getting through to him. "You'll probably be walking into a trap."

"I can handle it."

"You'll have to lure him out."

"I can handle it!"

"I won't be able to help you."

"You've done enough already."

Nick paused. This wasn't right. He couldn't let him go to the Raven; he was known there. There was no doubt in his mind that if Maverick stepped one foot in there, he wouldn't be making it out,

"No, there has to be some other way," Nick contemplated. He walked around the bench, rubbing his temple. "I can't let you go in there."

"It's not up to you," Maverick said calmly. "It's not like it's the first time I've come across this kind of situation, Detective. I've faced death many times and I'm still here."

"But you haven't faced a roomful of vampires all at once!" Nick's voice rose to a tense, but even level. He faced Maverick from behind the bench, his hands gripping the bench hard enough to rip it apart. "Not only will you have to deal with vampires who know who you are, but you'll have to contend with Derek's maker, and I can assure you, there's nothing more he would love than to see you dead. You go in there, and you're practically giving him exactly what he wants!"

"How many arrows can you shoot at once? How many stakes can you hold in one hand? It will never be enough. They will be on you faster than a pack of starving wolves. Derek will be one of them. You're food to him, plain and simple. Can you honestly shut away every feeling you have towards him to kill him as he attacks you?"

Maverick exhaled a shaky breath, Knight's words had struck home. He was right: the plan to waltz into the Raven was suicide, but under the circumstances, it was the only thing he could come up with. He dragged his hand across his face. "I fell so much for him, the thought of it makes me sick, but I can't help wanting to free him from this! He doesn't deserve it! We've fought so hard to diminish the numbers, it just isn't fair that he has to become what we strove to destroy!"

"Who are you doing it for?" Nick asked softly. "Derek, or yourself?"

Maverick stared at him, unable to answer right away. Tears began to well up in his eyes, and he made no attempt to wipe them away. "I don't suppose you have...no, you couldn't have children-what was I thinking? My point is that I've raised Derek for a long time. I took him from his parents who were bent on destruction. I gave him everything they couldn't. And as someone who cares for a child they raise, you don't ever want to see them suffer. To me, seeing Derek like this is more suffering than I would ever want to hear. And I know that he didn't ask to become like this. His life has been stolen from him, and that tears at my heart. Maybe he likes what he is, but I know that it's a feeling he will become bored with. He'll miss all the things he used to do. And there's a part inside him, that I know is still there, a part that is repulsed by what he is. He knows that his options are limited, and there is only one way out." Maverick's voice began to crack as he bared his true feelings to Nick. "You may think I'm being selfish, but I know Derek better than anybody. He's too human to be a vampire. And I'm too much of a father to let him remain one."

There was a part of Nick that sympathized with the hunter; Nick cared for a young boy once, only to have Lacroix bring him across. He had felt outraged and betrayed then, just as Maverick felt now. "I can see if he's in the Raven, maybe ask some questions," he said finally. "If he's there, I'll mention something about you looking for him. If he's not, then you're on your own."

Maverick stood, rendered mute with gratitude. He stammered, trying to find the right way to thank Nick.

"You're welcome." Nick walked away slowly with his head down, but spun around to offer a last piece of advice. "Wait her. Don't come to the Raven. As I said, if you're spotted, I won't be able to help you."

"You're taking a big risk," Maverick shouted to him.

Nick smiled. "To quote you, I can handle it."

Derek entered the Raven at 1:00, hoping to repeat his performance from the night before. Lacroix had fed him a few hours ago, and he was already starting to feel the annoying hunger pains. The dance floor was packed; he didn't think he'd have much trouble feeding tonight.

He strolled around the crowd, slowly and methodically, keeping note of women that attracted him. None of them looked like Kathy, he lamented. The more he thought about her, the worse he felt. Lacroix told him that it was foolish to dwell on the past, but he couldn't help it. The guilt hurt more than the hunger sometimes. He would never forget the blank look on her lifeless face, the face that had been so vibrant and beautiful moments before his fangs entered her neck. The image would remain with him for as long as he was a vampire, and a small part of him didn't think he could bear that.

Some vampire I am! he scolded himself. *I can't get all mushy like this!* He shook Kathy's face from his mind, and returned to the task at hand. Find a girl, immobilize her will, lead her upstairs to one of the spare rooms designed for such a purpose, and take just as much as he needed, as Lacroix had instructed him. It was that simple, so why was he stalling?

As he continued his search, he felt something was wrong. His vampire sense alerted him that he was being watched. Was someone looking at him, possibly eyeing him as a victim? He discreetly scanned the room, hoping to find who was looking at him. From behind the bar, he saw a dark-haired woman whose blue eyes were searing imaginary holes through him. That was Janette, Lacroix told him, and she owned the Raven. *She's probably just watching out for me*, he thought, feeling relieved. *She must know that I'm new.*

Derek watched as her gaze shifted from him to a tall blond man walking towards the bar. She kissed his cheek as he approached her. Derek felt momentarily jealous. *Who was this guy?* He stared intently at him, and was surprised to find that he, too, was a vampire. *Funny*, he thought, *he doesn't look like a vampire.*

He circled the crowd, but his attention shifted from finding a meal to learning why Janette had been staring at him. She and the blond man talked, and she pointed in Derek's direction, her eyes never leaving the man's face. Derek wondered if the man was looking for him, although he couldn't think of any reason why. Maybe he was part of some vampire welcoming committee.

Derek was briefly distracted by a red-haired woman who looked a little like Kathy. He looked back to the bar and Janette was alone. *Where did he go?* he panicked. *He couldn't disappear that fast!*

A hand touched Derek's shoulder, nearly causing him to yell out. He turned and came face to face with the man from the bar. "Can I talk to you?" the man asked directly into his ear. He began to walk towards the bar, his eyes beckoning Derek to follow.

Derek didn't sense any danger from the man, so he followed him to the far end of the bar where a glass filled to the brim with a crimson liquid waited for him. Derek sat on the stool, waited for the man to take his seat, and began to drink heartily from the glass. He had to restrain himself from gulping the contents.

"You can have more, if you like," the man said. "No need to drink it down so quickly."

His words fell on deaf ears as Derek finished off the glass. He placed the glass down and used a napkin from the bar to wipe his lips. "You wanted to talk to me about something. Who are you?"

"My name's Nick. I'm sure Lacroix has mentioned me to you."

Nicholas, the mortal-lover, Lacroix had called him. Derek recalled his discussion of the vampire who spent most of his immortal life attempting to regain what he had given up, something that Lacroix found offensive and pointless.

Derek nodded. "He has. He told me that you want to become human again." He watched the bartender refill his glass. "Is that possible?"

Nick was thrown by his question, and paused before responding. "I've come close a few times, but nothing has been permanent. I do my best to keep a semblance of a so-called life." He folded his arms on top of the bar. "Why would you ask me that? Surely, you of all people, would know the answer."

Derek shrugged. "I just thought that you might have found some kind of cure. I mean, you've been around for a long time, right?"

"There's only one cure I know of, Derek," Nick said. "And it's not pretty."

"Yeah, I know." Derek picked up his glass and started to swish the liquid around, not wanting to drink it but to watch it drip slowly down the inside of the glass. For some reason, he wasn't thirsty anymore. "I've been there."

Nick cleared his throat, dreading what would probably happen next. Derek could either take the news about Maverick calmly, or he could go ballistic and attack him, causing a scene and trying Nick's patience. "You must have seen many deaths that way."

"First hand," Derek commented, his voice far away. "I was supposed to be the next hunter. Look where I am now."

Nick leaned in close to Derek. "I happen to know where you can talk to Maverick."

Derek frantically spun around in his chair. "Is he here? He can't be here! Is he crazy?"

"He's not here, Derek," Nick said placing a forceful hand upon Derek's shoulder. "I wouldn't let him come."

Derek frenzied eyes rapidly scanned the room; he had to be here! He wouldn't put it past Maverick to walk into a virtual vampire factory, just so he could talk to him. Nick was right, though; he wasn't here. Derek closed his eyes in a wave of relief. "Where is he?" he whispered.

"Do you want to know?"

Derek nodded slowly, his eyes remaining closed.

He knows, Nick thought. *He knows what's going to happen.* "You don't have to go. You could stay here and wait till tomorrow to move on."

"He'll track me down, like all the others. I'll be nothing more but a quest to him."

"That's not true, Derek," Nick said. "He cares for you."

"As I care for him," Derek added. "It's for that reason that I should talk to him." he turned to Nick with glassy eyes. "I had seen a killing, but I wasn't chased. The vampire might have sensed me, but I'm not sure why he didn't come after me. I called Maverick to tell him, and that's when Lacroix took me." He shifted uncomfortably on the stool. "I've tried to think of a reason why he would want me. Obviously, he had some plan to use me against Maverick, to take my knowledge of his tactics and use it against him. I think he expects me to be as vicious as him, to take back what Maverick had taken from me from as a kid. I can't do that. I've known from the day I went with Maverick that I was chosen, not taken."

"How did you know?"

"Dreams. Other kids had bogeymen. I had vampires." He picked up his glass and took a small sip. "In most of my dreams, I would be fighting vampires. I never paid attention to it until I kept dreaming of the same vampires, over and over. When I began apprenticing with Maverick, I realized that some of the ones we killed were from my dreams as a kid."

"You were having premonitions."

Derek shrugged. "I guess."

"Did you dream of anything else?"

"I had a lot of nightmares," Derek said, looking down at the floor. "In fact, I've living one now." He looked at Nick with painful, imploring eyes. "Do you know what it feels like to become your worst nightmare?"

"More than you know." Nick had met his share of troubled souls, including himself, but he couldn't help feeling genuinely sorry for Derek. Unlike other people that were brought across, Derek did not revel in what he had become, there was too much hunter in him to accept himself as his own prey.

"I don't know what to do," Derek muttered in a choked tone. He covered his face with his hands and dragged them down as if he attended to pull off his flesh. "Why couldn't I be left alone?"

"It's not Lacroix's way to leave things as they should be," Nick said, facing him. "But he doesn't control you. If this is not what you want, you're the only one who can choose to do something about it."

"If I do...choose to..." Derek found that he couldn't finish the sentence. The pathways from mind to mouth wouldn't accept what Derek was considering, "Would Lacroix find out?"

Nick leaned back in his stool; there was something that would have define repercussions. A thought flickered in Nick's mind: could that have been Lacroix's plan all along? Could Lacroix have planned to bring Derek across, thus angering Maverick and sending him after Lacroix in a rage, violating the pact made between Nick and Robert Maverick? Nick knew that Lacroix would not fight alone--a full scale assault by a hunter would give Lacroix the impetus to gain an audience with the Enforcers, something Nick knew he had it avoid at all costs. "He'd find out sooner or later," Nick answered. "Hopefully, I can get Maverick to safety before that happens."

Derek was silent for a few minutes, unmoving and staring blankly past Nick. *I don't think I could make such a decision*, Nick pondered in earnest. To knowingly walk into your own death was something Nick had never had to do, and he was thankful for that. But he felt such a deep sense of remorse for Derek, someone who spent years fighting what he fought was evil, only to have to succumb to the fate he had give to others. He didn't deserve that, and Nick secretly wished there was something, anything, he could do.

"I think if you still want to talk to Maverick," Nick said in a low whisper, trying to snap Derek back to the matter at hand, "We should go soon."

Derek blinked, then gave a deep sigh. He nodded slightly, and slowly rose from the stool. "Take me to him," he said curtly. "Let's get this over with."

Maverick glanced at his watch for the millionth time, wondering how things were going between Knight and Derek. It had been close to two hours since the detective had gone off, hoping to locate Derek and approach him without provocation. Maverick felt the seeds of worry begin to blossom in the pit of his stomach: what if Derek reacted the way Maverick feared--the vampiric rage bursting forth, his fragile mind already twisted by power and blood. He had no doubt that Knight could handle such an outburst, but it was what Knight would have to do to Derek that made it feel as if someone were wringing his intestines like a wet cloth.

Something's wrong, he thought frantically. *Knight should've been back by now. Maybe I should go to the Raven.*

A loud *whoosh!* behind him caused Maverick to spin around with his hand inside his coat, ready to pull out a weapon. His hand froze when he saw Knight and Derek standing two feet away from him.

All of Maverick's muscles relaxed, and relief flowed over him like a cool river in July. He was so glad to see Derek, and he had to restrain himself from running over and giving him a fatherly hug. As it were, he stood motionless, wanting nothing more but to look at him. Derek wore different clothing that added a expensive flair to his usually T-shirt and jeans clad form. His blond hair had been brushed back, revealing his watery blue eyes and accentuating his newly pale complexion. Behind the altered physical appearance. Maverick still saw his friend and helper, and was able to ascertain his intent just by looking into his soulful eyes, which were filled with a combination of desperation and determination that called out a silent plea to Maverick.

Help me.

"Look who I ran into," Nick joked, trying to lighten the situation, "Thought we'd drop by."

Maverick shrugged. "It's not like I was going anywhere."

"I should leave you two to talk," Nick took a step away from Derek, but stopped and turned, placing his hand upon Derek's shoulder. "Remember it's ultimately up to you. Talk to him. He cares for you. Either way, you should make the final decision."

Derek nodded, wondering if Nick realized that the decision had already been made.

"Thank you, Nick. Tell Lacroix that I'm sorry I wasn't what he wanted me to be."

Nick flashed a sardonic grin. "Don't worry. He'll find out soon enough." With that, he took to the air, leaving Maverick and Derek alone.

They stood as if rooted to the ground, neither of them wanting to make the first move. Derek found that he couldn't think of the first thing to say to Maverick. Here was his chance to open up to him, to tell him things he had thought about since waking up in the morgue. He wanted to tell him about Kathy, and how he felt while he drained her. Maverick would understand that it was necessary. He always understood.

Maverick's heartbeat drummed through Derek's head; he had been thinking so hard about what to say that he relaxed his mind to the point where his keen sense of hearing took over. He heard the muffled thumping of Maverick's heart, a bit faster than it should be, but normal under the circumstances. Derek's eyes narrowed in on Maverick's neck, and locked on the pulsating vein that throbbed like a brightly-lit neon sign. Derek's fangs unconsciously began to lower, the vampire part of him preparing his body to feed.

The still lingering human part of him refused to allow it, and he quickly spun around, shutting his eyes away from Maverick, not wanting him to see his glowing eyes or the fangs. He covered his face with his arms, ashamed at what he had become.

Maverick spotted the change, which took all of five seconds. Witnessing Derek transform was a shock, and it shook him from his momentary delusion that Derek was fine, that he wasn't a vampire, and they could go home and forget about the whole thing. The greenish eyes convinced him that Derek was far from fine, and he needed his help.

"Derek," Maverick's voice creaked, "Don't turn away." He took two cautionary steps toward Derek, who flailed out to his left arm in defense.

"Don't! Don't look at me!"

Maverick gulped, feeling his face heat up and his eyes begin to water. *Not now*, he told himself fiercely, *hold it together!* "Come on, Derek, you're acting like I've never seen a vampire before. Turn around so I can talk to you. Please!"

Derek wiped his eyes and slowly lowered his arms. It seemed to Maverick that Derek was turning in slow motion, but when he finally faced forward, his face was creased with tears. Seeing Derek so vulnerable hit Maverick with a torrent of pity that he didn't think he could hold his emotions in check much longer.

"Is this what you wanted to see?" Derek said loudly. "Do you want to see what my carelessness did to me? How I let my guard down and let them make me one of them?"

"No, Derek-" Maverick started, moving closer.

"You showed me how to defend myself, over and over. Yet when it came for the ultimate test, I failed. I let them win!" Derek grabbed the lapels of Maverick's coat and pulled him close. "Look at me! LOOK AT ME!" he screamed, shaking Maverick. "I'm a monster! I've killed someone! I took her blood and I liked it!" He made eye contact with Maverick, trying to make them say what he couldn't verbalize. Blinking, he lowered his head slightly. "I liked it for a while, until I realized what I had done. After I fed, I felt guilty, and I couldn't stop thinking about her. Her face still won't leave my mind." He paused and squinted his eyes, attempting to keep back the tears that threatened to come unabated.

"You had no choice," Maverick said, soothingly. He took hold of Derek's wrists, ignoring the chill of his skin. "One of the very first things I told you is that a vampire has no control over his hunger. When it comes, it only gets worse until it's quenched. You're no different, Derek. She was there, and you needed her blood. End of story."

"I can't do it anymore!" Derek wailed, letting the tears come. "I don't want this! I'm too much like you to remain like this, I can't shut off my feelings just to quench my hunger. I can't kill someone and watch them die in my arms." He rested his head on Maverick's shoulder. "I'm not a monster," he whimpered softly.

Maverick's eyes were wet as he wrapped his arm around Derek's head. "No, you're not. You never were," he whispered into Derek's ear.

He was suddenly engulfed within Derek's arms. Maverick couldn't believe the feeling of warmth he was receiving; he couldn't remember if he had ever hugged Derek in all the years they worked together. This felt as if it were long overdue.

Derek lifted his head off of Maverick's shoulder and leaned toward his ear. "End this," he whispered faintly, his voice eerily even. "Please."

Maverick knew it was coming, but the wait for Derek to show allowed his mind to fall into a chasm of denial, a safe place that was shattered when Derek voluntarily asked him for a second death. He was thankful that Derek wanted it, relieved in the knowing that it was the best thing, yet he was suddenly filled with the most intense sorrow he had ever known. Killing other vampires was something that had become routine, and he had shed many a tear over their deaths. This one would be the last vampire killing he would do as a hunter, the last and the hardest.

"I want you to know," Maverick started, his voice catching, "that I've regarded you as the closest thing to a son as I will ever have."

"I've loved you like a father, too," Derek replied, facing Maverick. "I was actually looking forward to taking over as a hunter, you know, like a son taking over the general store when the old man got too tired."

Maverick smiled. "You would've made a great hunter."

Derek rested his head back onto Maverick's shoulder, wrapping his arms around him even tighter than before. There was nothing more to be said. He embraced Maverick for the last time, and waited.

The stake was inside a inner pocket of his coat. Maverick didn't want to push Derek away and make him lay on the ground so he could thrust downwards into his chest, which was the easiest way. He didn't want to let Derek go. Gently, his shaking hand found the stake and pulled it out slowly. He rolled it around in his hand, trying to get the perfect grip for the upward thrust he would have to perform. When his hand was perfectly molded around the smooth wood, he gripped Derek with his other arm as tight as he could.

"I'm sorry," he whispered and plunged the stake into Derek's chest.

Pain encompassed every pore of Derek's body; he was surprised that a dead body could feel so much pain. His eyes were skewered shut, and he wanted to scream as loud as he could, just to have some form of release. He grabbed handfuls of Maverick's coat, and tried to burrow his face into Maverick's shoulder. Derek held onto his mentor until he felt his knees falter and he slipped to the ground with Maverick's assistance.

Tears were spilling from Maverick's eyes like rapids as he eased Derek to the ground. The stake protruding from his chest was slanted and blood from the wound trickled down Derek's gray shirt and onto his pleated pants. Maverick's hand was slick with blood, but he paid no heed. His eyes were fixated on his dying partner, the boy who he had raised, the boy he had to kill.

"It's ...not your...fault," Derek managed to say, squinting as he felt the blackness enter him, eating away at the edge of his vision.

"I know," Maverick mouthed, his voice refusing to form in his throat.

Derek tried to smile, and he wanted to say one more thing before he passed, but his eyes began to roll upwards, and his lids closed silently. He was gone.

Maverick stroked Derek's lifeless face, and tenderly smoothed back the blond hair. "I love you, Derek," he said, hoping that his soul could hear and understand.

A sound came from behind Maverick, but he didn't have to look to know who it was. He cleared his throat and wiped his eyes in an effort to compose himself before he faced Detective Knight. "I need your help now," he admitted. "You see, usually when we--I mean, I --kill a vampire, I sprinkle some holy water on it, cut off the head and watch it decompose. Then I take what's left and burn it." He stood and dusted off his pants, turning to Nick. "I can't do that this time."

"I know," Nick nodded in agreement. "You've already been through a traumatic event." He bent down and picked Derek up cradling him in his arms like a sleeping child. "We have to go to the Raven."

"Why there?" Maverick asked, puzzled.

"Janette knows of people who will take care of him."

"What do you mean, 'take care of him'? What kind of care do other vampires dole out on their dead?" Maverick had a bad feeling about this. "I hope you don't mean that they eat."

"No! Absolutely not!" Nick protested. "Vampires will not feed on others, especially dead vampires." Nick began walking at a steady pace; even with Nick holding Derek in his arms, Maverick had to increase his pace by about a step just to keep up. "Vampires are almost religious in their treatment of their dead. Just like any other culture, they have their processes. Derek will be properly laid to rest. You needn't worry."

"Well, I do worry," Maverick admitted to in a harsh tone. "I've never known of this sect of vampire morticians. It doesn't make sense, really. why would such a vicious race--present company excluded--go to such lengths to bury something that's already dead?"

"I'll admit, it doesn't happen often, but for Derek," Nick glanced down at the still form in his arms, cursing Lacroix for his lousy judgment, "they'll make an exception."

Maverick was touched. Knight didn't have to do this, yet it seemed that he was going out of his way to make sure that Derek didn't suffer any more than he already had. It was as if he genuinely cared. He knew then that his ancestor had made the right choice in letting Nick go.

They drove Nick's car to the Raven, parking in front of the near-empty bar. Patrons were filtering out to return to wherever they came from, be it a coffin or a regular house. As Nick gently pulled out Derek's body from the back seat, Maverick was stunned that no one seemed to care that a dead body was being dragged from a car. He shut his door and followed Knight into the Raven.

"Janette!" Nick called as he stepped onto the empty dance floor. Within a minute, the brunette vampiress sauntered into the room with two large men at her side.

"You're cutting it close, Nicola," she said, playfully tapping her wrist.

"You know you can't rush these things," Nick replied.

The two men came to each side of Nick and lifted Derek from his arms as if he was a newborn baby. Maverick tensed, but remained still. He had to trust them, even if trusting a vampire was something he was totally against.

Janette stopped the men as they prepared to leave. She gingerly brushed her hand against Derek's cheek. "Such a waste," she sighed. "He was not right for this." She waved the men away and they slowly walked towards another room. Maverick followed their every step, his gaze never leaving Derek. They approached a doorway, hesitated for a second, then disappeared.

"It may not mean much, but you have my sympathies," Janette said.

"Thank you." Maverick raked a hand through his hair and let out an exasperated sigh.

"Okay, what now?" he asked, turning to Nick.

"We get you to safety. There's no doubt in my mind that Lacroix is aware of Derek's death, so we have to get you away from here."

"But where?"

Nick shrugged. "Where would you like to go?"

Maverick pondered the possibilities. He traveled extensively, but never stayed in one place for a long time, certainly not long enough to get a feel for a particular city. Nick was giving him a chance to start a new life, but he honestly had no idea where he wanted to go. "I don't know. Where would you go if you wanted to start over?"

"Let's see..." Nick circled Maverick, rubbing his chin in mock thought. "I think New Orleans would be a good place for you. You certainly look as though you'd fit in there nicely."

It took Maverick all of one second to agree. "Sounds good. I've only been there once, years ago when--" He stopped, and smiled in silent remembrance. "New Orleans is fine. I have some things back in my apartment. Should I--"

"Leave them," Nick said, shaking his head. "That's from your other life. You can get new things when you get to New Orleans. Besides, we don't have much time." He reached into his pocket, and paused when he realized it was empty. Nick gave Janette an imploring look. "I..uh..seem to be a little short. Can you.."

Janette sighed. "You'll owe me much more for this one, Nicola." She walked behind the bar and pulled out a cashbox. Opening it, she extracted a wad of bills that she threw to Nick. He caught it with one hand, and handed it to Maverick.

"This should help you start that new life."

Maverick was stunned by the gesture: there had to be at least a thousand dollars! "I can't take this."

"Yes, you can," Janette said. "He'll make you."

Nick tapped Maverick on the shoulder. "Come on. I have to get you to the airport before sunrise."

They walked toward the exit, but not before Maverick took Janette's hand and kissed it. "Thank you, for myself and Derek."

Janette smiled sarcastically. "Nick reminded me that I hadn't done a good deed in quite a while. You just happened to be the lucky recipient."

Nick grabbed Maverick's shoulder. "Let's go!"

They went outside and retrieved the knapsack from the car. The sky was beginning to lighten; Nick knew that this was going to have to be quick. He stepped behind Maverick, putting his arms around his waist, "Ready?"

"As ready as I'll ever be."

Maverick felt the sudden rush of wind on his face, but he wouldn't look down. He would have to contend with the feeling of flight without actually seeing anything. If he didn't open his eyes, he wouldn't get agitated, and it would lessen the chances of seeing him squirming and having Nick lose his hold. He could imagine what it would look like; the rooftops below him, buildings zooming past him as if he were a bird on a morning flight. He was happy with what he thought he would see, but there was no way he would open his eyes.

He felt Nick slow down, then descend, lowering them to the ground with practiced ease. As Maverick's feet touched the ground, Nick held him so that inertia wouldn't carry him forward. When he was steadied, he opened his eyes and realized that they were in the parking lot of the airport.

"That was quite a ride," Maverick commented.

"You won't find a more direct mode of transport, unless they start beaming people. like on that TV show." Nick was aware of his internal clock ticking away the precious minutes until sunrise. "I'd better go. I'll just make it back to my own place in time."

"I guess that makes us even, doesn't it?" Maverick asked.

"I would think so." Nick smiled and patted Maverick's shoulder. "Have a good life, Maverick."

"Thank you, Nick. For everything." Maverick shook Nick's hand, then watched him fly off. He followed Nick in the air until he became a faint dot that disappeared into the clouds.

Before he retired for the day, Lacroix decided to do some redecorating. It was the only way he could vent his anger over the loss of Derek. He grabbed a chair and slammed it against a wall, disrupting the angle of a framed still-life that innocently hung inches above the point of impact.

It wasn't just Derek's death that caused him such rage; it was the fact that the damn hunter got away, right from under his nose. By the time he sensed Derek die, he knew it would be pointless to track him. The hunter would already have disposed of him, leaving nothing but a charred heap of ashes. *If not for that pact*, Lacroix thought angrily, *I'd go after the man myself*. That was his plan all along, a plan gone regrettably awry by Derek's overpowering sense of humanity, something Lacroix grossly miscalculated.

As he contemplated the displacement of an end table, Lacroix had a distressing thought: what if the hunter didn't act alone? Surely, Derek would not go to him unless he was coerced, and if that were true, he knew exactly who would be doing the coercing. Nicholas always had a soft spot for those who were not meant to be taken. There was nothing that could be done about that: Nicholas was beyond his help. Then there was the other option: Derek chose to die. The very idea of Derek willingly going to his death was something that sickened Lacroix. Vampire suicide was something he had neither the tolerance nor the stomach for.

Spent from his remodeling efforts and the nearing sunrise, Lacroix rubbed his face and tried to let the anger leave him in a less destructive fashion, "Maybe it was for the best," he said, mentally conceding defeat. He was sorely disappointed that there was to be no involvement from the Enforcers: he so wanted them to assist him in the destruction of the hunters. But it was not meant to be. Such a task would have to wait for another time, another victim. He would search endlessly for that perfect one.

After all, he had more than enough time.

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ART CREDITS!

COVER ART BY BRIAN PRICE

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This fanzine will be the last fan press item we will be publishing for a while. Starting in March 1998, Quest Press will be entering the "PRO" publishing world with it's first national release!!

The novel "*Wing Commander*" will be available in bookstores starting in June. It will be released in March 1998 to the online buying community and for pre-release mail order through one of our distributors - Bookworld Companies. To order from Bookworld call 1-800-444-2524 Or you can purchase online at www.amazon.com

Copies of the book (with personalized author signatures!!) can be purchased direct from us. Email us anytime after January 1998 and we'll know pricing and all that on the novel. It's a paperback and we estimate it'll be between \$6 and \$7 a copy plus postage.

FINAL NOTE

Galley copies will be available for purchase from November 1st until March 1st. We have a **LIMITED** supply of these. The galleys are the review versions of the book that were sent to book reviewers at *The New York Times* and other papers. What is for sale is those few extra copies we had left over. They are available at our production cost which is \$20 per copy.

THANK YOU!!!

